

# 3 PLY: Exploring The Limits And Possibilities For Transformative Workplace Learning In Irish Schools

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## Introduction

In this paper we report on preliminary research conducted in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland by researchers at Dublin City University and the University of Ulster. The research considered the limits and possibilities for meaningful workplace learning for young people to support their transition to sustainable employment in the post-Global Financial Crisis context. In the research, we adopted the term ‘workplace learning’ as opposed to the term ‘workbased learning’ as it underscores our interest in learning that happens in a real workplace rather than learning that might happen in schools while targeted at *future* work endeavours. Our specific focus was on the forms of workplace learning that are organized within the context of the senior school curriculum and their role in enhancing youth transition. Funded by the Irish Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS), the research was conducted in 2013.

The genesis for the research was, on one level, the suggestion that whereas in the past education and employment might have been consecutive endeavours — each with its own preferred pedagogy and with education being completed before employment commenced — an historical juncture has now been reached where a third educational settlement is being forged (Vickers 2008). An education settlement is generally thought of as a negotiated agreement about the dominant way that things should be done in education; Settlement One was established with the progressive introduction of compulsory education across Western democracies. In Settlement One, a small, talented minority of young people were expected to complete all the years of school and progress to university. This settlement persisted until the late 1970s when youth unemployment first appeared as a policy issue. In Settlement Two (which has not extinguished the original settlement that persists in a number of private school settings but is now dominant) almost all young people complete the senior years of schooling and these senior years are designed to prepare school completers for a much wider range of futures than just university. In Settlement Two, only a small, disadvantaged minority of students leave school early. However, at a structural level the focus on full-time education, followed by employment, remains.

The notion of a third educational settlement reflects understandings that in the globalized context many young people, by choice or necessity, commence some level of employment before they complete their full-time education. For some, this reflects their

involvement in the consumer-oriented society (Bauman 2007). For others, the driver for combining work and study reflects a more immediate material need to work as a means to contribute to family income or to education costs that fall outside those provided ‘free’ in the cost shifting neoliberal educational context (Bond 2009). At the same time, it is accepted that some form of workplace experience is essential in competing for the limited labour market opportunities of the risk society (Beck, 1992).

In the third settlement, the boundaries between education and employment are argued to be blurring (Hoffman 2011). At a structural level this demands a new series of ‘agreements’ about where learning takes place, about who is a ‘teacher’, about what it is to ‘know’, about how learning should be assessed and about how conflicting notions of time — school time and industrial time— are to be reconciled. The new settlement also provokes interest in the question of how young people who are learning in workplace settings can be provided with expansive learning environments (Fuller & Unwin 2004). Work in both Australia (Australian National Schools Network 2008) and Canada (Taylor, Leke et al. 2012) underscores the need for a whole-of-community approach where employers work alongside schools, parents and students in maximizing the benefits of workplace learning and ensuring that the practical demands of conflicting schedules are managed at a structural level.

The aim of our research was to test our theory that, in this context, the possibilities for meaningful workplace learning for young people would be created, or not, by the learning ethos of the workplaces in which they engage and that this learning ethos is in part created by the presence of young people and the perspectives of teachers who contribute to workplace learning interventions. The project title — 3 PLY — related to the idea that the three strands of learning: by young people, by their teachers, by employees in workplace learning sites, must be interwoven if there is to be potential for transformative learning. In this pilot phase, we focused on the perspectives of teachers. This paper proceeds thus: first, we sketch the call to action. We also provide an overview of the positioning of workplace learning in the senior school cycle in each jurisdiction. We sketch our research methods before presenting selected findings from the research which we consider through the lens of Actor Network Theory and, specifically, notions of intermediaries and mediators (Latour 2007). We close with some suggestions for future research.

### **The importance of workplace learning in school-to-work transition**

The significance of our research and the broader question of the contribution that school-coordinated workplace learning makes to youth transition lies in the impact of the risks and uncertainties of globalization. In the wake of the 2008-2009 Global Financial Crisis rates of youth unemployment — always higher than rates of adult unemployment — soared; in the Republic of Ireland at the height of the recession Eurostat reported nearly one in three young people aged 15 to 24 was unemployed (Scarpetta, Sonnet et al 2010; OECD 2011, O’Higgins 2012). Youth now have to compete for limited employment opportunities with employees who may have secured extensive work experience through their prior employment.

In 2012, the OECD noted that even in the third year of something of a recovery from the Crisis, youth unemployment rates had not recovered (OECD 2012). Even if we believe that some form of economic recovery is now underway, many commentators argue that young people will be ‘scarred’ by prolonged periods of joblessness they may have to endure as any recovery moves beyond the unused capacity currently available to employers. Scarring refers to the process whereby the experience of unemployment increases future unemployment risks and/or reduced future earnings. This occurs through two main mechanisms: first, ‘human capital effects’ (that is, the deterioration of skills and lack of work

experience) and, second, through ‘signalling effects’ (the period of unemployment ‘signals’ that the applicant may present a risk of low productivity to prospective employers). However, scarring can also risk a young person’s future happiness, job satisfaction, wages and health (Bell and Blanchflower 2010). While there is no consensus on how enduring scarring might be, research indicates that for disadvantaged young people with low or no qualifications the effects may be difficult to remove (Scarpetta *et al.* 2010; Gregg 2001) and may leave an enduring wages scar: for young men in the United Kingdom Gregg and Tominey (2005) found a scar from one year of youth unemployment at the age of 22 in the range of 13 to 21 per cent twenty years later.

The chance to experience working and learning at the same time – a key attribute of the 21st Century labour market (Hodgson & Spours 2001) – and to gain some form of work experience to add to a CV may initially be limited to part-time jobs held during the senior years of school or to the forms of workplace learning co-ordinated through schools. Yet school co-ordinated workplace learning initiatives frequently demonstrate very limited learning opportunities (Jeffers 2006). McGonagle (2006: 78) found that while workplace learning has the potential to be a valuable learning experience, many actors exist within such a programme, each with different roles and each enacting that role with particular consequences for how much learning could occur:

*all students will not necessarily achieve the same benefits. This does not devalue the work experience programme, instead it perhaps reflects the need to ensure that students are fully prepared before, monitored during and debriefed after the work placement.*

While we would not disagree, it does not engage with the full range of actors who influence what happens in workplace learning settings. Internationally it is acknowledged that, in the globalized context, workplace learning has a significant role to play in the educational landscape. In preparing for this, the OECD argues that it is necessary for *all* stakeholders – rather than only students – to be trained and prepared for the full process of workplace learning (Scarpetta and Sonnett 2012).

### **Workplace learning in senior school curricula by jurisdiction**

In this section we provide a brief overview of the policy context for school co-ordinated workplace learning. While the journey between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland can be a brief one in terms of geographical distance, there is somewhat more distance in senior school curricula. In the North, the curriculum sets out eight general Areas of Learning for what are referred to as Key Stages 3 and 4 (ages 11 to 14 and 14 to 16, respectively). In the senior years, students study towards Advanced Level examinations; students also study Learning for Life and Work (LLW), a programme that embraces employability skills, personal development, and local and global citizenship. Careers Education in Northern Ireland is defined as enabling learners to manage their career development, make informed choices, and make successful transitions into education, training or employment. It is time-tabled, allows cross-curricular opportunities to foster employability skills, and makes provision for appropriate workplace learning experiences (Department of Education and Department for Employment and Learning, 2009).

Each school has a designated careers adviser who would meet a student on a maximum of two occasions a year. There is no mandatory, formal training for qualified teachers who take on this role; indeed, there has been some degree of political consternation that in 2013 only 32 per cent of teachers had a specialist qualification (Northern Ireland

Assembly 2013). Moreover, it was suggested that many teachers had no interest in teaching in the transition arena, regarding it as an ‘add-on’.

There have been differences in provision of workplace learning opportunities between academically-focused grammar schools and more vocationally-oriented secondary schools in Northern Ireland (Department of Education, 2004). The timing of workplace learning has also differed between selective (grammar) and non-selective (secondary) schools with the former very largely doing this in Year 13, the latter in Year 12. No selective schools arranged work experience in Year 14, although almost half the non-selective schools did so.

In the Republic of Ireland the senior school curriculum currently comprises a three-year Junior Cycle starting at age 12 followed by a three-year Senior Cycle leading to one of a number of Leaving Certificate qualifications (the Established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, and the Leaving Certificate Applied). Each of these has some degree of opportunity for workplace learning. The first year of the Senior Cycle is a nominally optional Transition Year, often ‘conceived of as being more akin to a “gap year” between the junior and senior examination cycles’ (Clerkin, 2013). Transition Year is a non-examination year where students explore a range of vocational, cultural and social endeavours alongside subject studies.

Transition Year has been offered in the Republic since 1974. While Transition Year has been embraced at the same time as it is often derided (Jeffers 2011), participation has steadily grown (Clerkin, 2013) and there is consensus that it contributes to increased maturity, confidence, and social competence and awareness: students who complete Transition Year generally also experience a positive impact on subsequent academic performance (Clerkin, 2012). Jeffers (2011) suggests these gains could be attributed to learning experiences that occur beyond the classroom.

In the perception of the teachers we spoke to, Transition Year is where workplace learning in second level curriculum in the Republic of Ireland has its true home. In some schools Transition Year students spend a day every week in workplaces; other schools adopt a block approach. As in the North, the type of school makes a difference in terms of the form and timing of workplace learning opportunities. Clerkin (2013) suggests that schools designated as disadvantaged were comparatively less likely to offer Transition Year. However, in the recent recessionary context, many schools were finding provision compromised given cuts to funding across the entire education sector. Students who do not have Transition Year as an option, or who choose not to take the option, can still access some level of workplace learning through involvement in the Leaving Certificates.

In the Republic careers advice is provided through in-school guidance counselors: teachers who are professionally qualified at tertiary level for a full-time, multi-faceted role with their professional body being the Institute of Guidance Counsellors. Counselling may be personal, educational or career counselling or a combination of these (NCGE, 2004); these staff may also have a significant role in the co-ordination of workplace learning. Depending on the staff configuration in a given school, guidance counsellors can know students well, potentially meeting fortnightly along with other key personnel in the arena of guidance and support.

## **Generating the data**

The research was envisaged as a pilot of a larger research project that would allow us to follow young people into workplace learning settings. This first phase research – speaking to teachers about their perspectives – was conducted with the support of a Research Assistant.

The research commenced with a desktop review of policy documents on workplace learning in the senior school in both jurisdictions. This was complemented by a necessarily limited review of recent extant research on workplace learning by students in formal education settings.

We also conducted semi-structured interviews in six schools. As noted, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland differ in terms of senior school curricula and in the pre-service preparation of staff to work on the broad arena of careers guidance. Given these differences, we used purposive sampling, approaching schools we believed could best inform this small project given our intent was conceptual – we were seeking to test some of our assumptions about teacher’s perspectives on the organization, potential, and accrued benefits of workplace learning experiences within the senior school cycle rather than making any claim to generalizability. In the Republic of Ireland, two Catholic boys’ schools were selected (one rural, one urban). Both schools were under the Trusteeship of Edmund Rice Schools (formerly the Irish Christian Brothers) and both are non-selective. Four interviews were conducted (one Principal; two subject teachers who taught classes in Transition Year; one Transition Year Co-ordinator). In Northern Ireland a further four interviews were conducted. In Northern Ireland two boys’ schools were selected, and two co-educational schools. Both boys’ schools were voluntary grammar schools, one from the maintained sector and one controlled. The co-educational schools were non-selective schools, one from the maintained sector and one controlled. Two schools were urban and two rural. In Northern Ireland all interviewees were with the Head of the Careers Department.

An interview schedule was drafted for use in both jurisdictions which included twelve questions which focused on how students were involved in workplace learning, who arranged the work placements, whether part-time work was used for workplace learning and whether staff were aware of part-time work of students. We also queried whether it made a difference who arranged the workplace learning and how knowledge generated in the course of workplace learning by the student was able to be integrated by subject teachers and by the school itself to inform its practice. Finally, we explored barriers to maximizing the benefits of workplace learning.

To broaden the perspectives beyond those in the interview schools we also conducted an on-line survey in both jurisdictions. The survey ‘echoed’ the questions that had been used in interviews. In the Republic, the survey was circulated to the full membership of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors; 40 responses were. In Northern Ireland, the survey was circulated through the NI Schools’ Careers Association; 31 responses were received. The data was subject to thematic analysis and a full narrative report was submitted to and is available from SCoTENS ([scotens.org](http://scotens.org)). In this paper, we revisit and reread the data through the lens of Actor Network Theory (Latour 2007) and, in particular, the idea of that various actors played a role as either intermediaries or mediators in creating the conditions for transformative workplace learning by all stakeholders. It is to a brief introduction of these terms that we now turn.

## **Workplace learning actors as intermediaries and mediators**

Actor Network Theory, or ANT, engages with the idea of exploring, rather than assuming or ignoring, the full range of actors that are present when we seek to understand what happens in social practice. This demands that we defer drawing on default explanations of social factors as a ‘specific type of causality’ until such time as we have explored, in detail, how the social appears in a given form at a given time and place through a process of assemblage of many kinds of ‘actants’. The term actants refers to the full range of *potential* agents involved in

workplace learning, both human and non-human; the actant has the potential to become a ‘performing part’ (Fenwick and Edwards 2010: 10) of the network. A defining position for ANT is that there is no difference in the treatment of human and non-human actants. This is not to say that all actors are equal: we can’t assess the status of any actant until after a detailed exploration.

ANT is an approach to understanding the social that is focused on rendering visible the diverse range of actants as ‘mediators’ and/or ‘intermediaries’. This is a small, but vital, distinction. An intermediary ‘transports meaning or force without transformation’ (Latour 2007: 39): whatever is its input is what will be its output. By contrast, mediators ‘transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry’ (Latour 2007: 39). Latour notes that no matter how complicated an intermediary is it can count be counted as ‘one’ or even nothing, it can be easily forgotten. A mediator, however, is complex no matter how simple it may look. Mediators ‘may lead in multiple directions which will modify all the contradictory accounts attributed to its role’. This distinction is important because, to paraphrase Latour (2007: 105) if a social factor such as a policy around workplace learning is transported through intermediaries, then everything important is *in the policy*, not in the intermediaries (be they teachers, school buildings, curriculum, teaching tools, clocks, textbooks, impending examinations, learning management systems, educational media, administrative schedules and so on). It is to a necessarily brief assessment of this idea that we now turn.

## Findings

Given the limitations of the research in both time and scale, we structured our findings around four key themes. These were 1) responsibility to workplace learning arrangements; 2) the recognition or otherwise of part-time work as an opportunity for workplace learning; 3) teacher professional development through and for workplace learning and, finally, 4) barriers to realizing the potential for transformative workplace learning. Here, we will briefly consider each of these from a perspective of their position as intermediaries that simply transported policy or as something more.

In both jurisdictions teachers favoured students organizing their own workplace learning given the opportunity this provided to practice the process of seeking employment and to build confidence. Students were guided on what placements they should seek. However, there was recognition that this process did not facilitate higher-level learning opportunities given the lack of opportunity it afforded for teachers and workplace staff to collaborate in designing invitational learning opportunities (Billett 2001). In this, teachers articulated a range of perspectives that highlighted their role as mediators making other mediators – employers, parents, transport providers ... – do things. This is *not* to endow teachers with some form of power and, or, responsibility to cause things to happen. Rather, Latour (2007: 217) emphasises that the mediator modifies action through attachment. It is through a process of assemblage where connection causes change. For example, in our research, respondents would note how, while wanting students to own their workplace learning endeavours, they would mediate – through back doors and community connections – so that there was a readiness for a student’s approach. Other mediators would be transport networks and parents who mobilized, or not, various workplace learning possibilities.

On the second issue, while part-time work by students had generally been discouraged in examination years in both jurisdictions, in the recessionary context, any work was seen as an opportunity to support transition. Thus the notion of a third educational settlement was moderated: while young people may wish to work by choice or necessity while they were

still enrolled as full-time school students, those opportunities were now seen to be severely constrained. This finding complicates a suggestion that part-time work is actively discouraged by teachers and schools: in both jurisdictions a majority of survey respondents felt part-time work was a valuable opportunity for workplace learning (just over 60 per cent in Northern Ireland and nearly 75 per cent in the Republic of Ireland) and one that schools had to work with students to balance. Here we see part-time work conceptualized as more than an intermediary: more than a certain, zero-sum game that takes away from the core work of schools. Rather, we see in many respondents a movement towards uncertainty and recognition that part-time work has a valuable role to play as part of the social learning systems that young people inhabit. At the same time, with limits to part-time work in the current economic context, opportunities for quality workplace learning co-ordinated through school was seen by many respondents to have become a vital. Yet, this recognition was one that respondents suggested was not shared by others in schools, even feared given the dominance of spiralling credentialism as an actor in school settings. An interviewee in NI noted the work to be done to build appreciation within the school of the benefits of workplace learning:

*Some staff think that the week the pupils are out on work placement that all the knowledge they have gained in their subject area will drain out their ears and their grades will fall.*

Such quotes illuminate the pressure that many teachers feel to ensure students achieve high grades at GCSE and A level, a situation equally evident in the Republic of Ireland with multiple references to Leaving Certificate ‘points’ as being the ultimate measure of school success, a situation reinforced at a community level by a further mediator – media – with yearly cycles of intense coverage focused on how to acquire ‘points’ and subsequent detailed analysis of who secured them.

Our third area of commentary concerned the question of readiness for workplace learning and the point we have already noted that while students may be being prepared for workplace learning endeavours, teachers often lacked preparation for their role in the assemblage that is workplace learning. In this instance, we spoke with teachers who, despite their role in teaching students who were actively involved in workplace learning as part of the curriculum, did not connect to that aspect of their students in any way at all. In this, the classroom could be understood as an intermediary – the workplace learning that was part of the student, which the student carried with them back into the school – flowed through these classrooms with no impact whatsoever: the learning was not used, let alone transformed, amplified or kept alive. Input as output. In this way, no assemblage was made between the workplace and the school in ways that could be transformative for both learning contexts. When we probed this with those respondents who were classroom teachers we met with diverse responses as to readiness. For some, there was almost an epiphany: an *‘I never thought of that ... if I knew what they're doing... I could do a topic ... I never ever thought of connecting the two’*. However, for others in the same school there was no recognition that there might be value: *‘I don't see how I could use anything they are using out there’*.

In part, this reflected the fourth theme we explored, one that is can be understood as a key mediator in the implementation of policies of workplace learning. The recent recessionary context – particularly in the Republic of Ireland where there was a moratorium on recruitment to the public sector and wholesale stripping of resources – had spread staff in schools so thinly that, even where the transformative potential of workplace learning was appreciated and where highly-experienced teachers with vision for the its potential were in key roles, action was severely constrained. Time, money, anger at government policy,

tiredness were all internal mediators that influenced how the policy played out on the ground of individual schools. Clearly, much more detailed research that followed these actors and others actors beyond the 'walls' of the school and their role as mediators is warranted. It is with a necessarily brief comment on this that we close this conference paper.

### **Concluding comments**

This project used a mixed methods approach to explore teachers' perspectives on the limits and possibilities for meaningful workplace learning. Our thesis was that, in the post-recessionary context of a new educational settlement, workplace learning was of increasing importance but was dependent on an assemblage of actors to realize its potential. Here, we have done some preliminary work to explore the potential of Actor Network Theory in understanding the full range of actors, and how they are involved, in realizing the possibilities that are suggested for workplace learning in the senior school years. Our research was limited in both scale and in focus. Our recommendation would be for further research in other contexts and through more in-depth discussions and observations that allow the actors – the full array of actors – to be followed. In the authoring of a more studies that focus on the full range of actants, identifying mediators who frustrate or further the policy agenda, we believe we can get much closer to a fuller understanding of the limits and possibilities for transformative workplace learning and, in the process, enhance our support for young people in their transition beyond school.

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