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# DEVELOPMENT AND CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING OF WORK-BASED LEARNING

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**Abstract/Izvleček**

Serious criticism of didactic intellectualism in the past resulted in a range of pedagogical approaches to Work-based Learning as a response to this issue. A comparative overview of the development of work-based learning over time is presented in this article. Additionally, a temporal approach to work-based and workplace learning is explored. We see the change of WBL from being one part of individual pedagogical approaches to becoming part of policy recommendations. Finally, a discussion of the didactic features of contemporary Work-based Learning clearly positions it as a didactic model. The paper stresses the importance of WBL as a didactic model that is appropriate in all student-centred classrooms, regardless of the level of education.

**Keywords:**
didactical model; work-based Learning; workplace learning; work-related learning, contemporary education.

**Razvoj in sodobno razumevanje praktičnega učenja skozi delo**

Ostra kritika didaktičnega intelektualizma v preteklosti je kot odgovor na to problematiko privedla do različnih pedagoških pristopov k učenju, ki temeljijo na praktičnem učenju skozi delo. V prispevku je prikazan primerjalni pregled razvoja praktičnega učenja skozi delo v daljšem časovnem obdobju. Poleg tega je predstavljen tudi sodobni pristop praktičnega učenja na delovnem mestu in usposabljanja z delom. Opazujemo lahko, kako je praktično učenje skozi delo, ki je bilo včasih del individualnih pedagoških pristopov, postalo del strateških priporočil. Razprava o didaktičnih značilnostih sodobnega praktičnega učenja skozi delo ga jasno opredeli kot didaktični model. Članek poudarja pomen praktičnega usposabljanja z delom kot didaktičnega modela, ki je primeren v vseh učilnicah, ki se osredinjajo na učence ne glede na stopnjo izobraževanja.

**Ključne besede:**
didaktični model; učenje skozi delo; učenje na delovnem mestu; učenje, povezano z delom, sodobno izobraževanje.

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## Introduction

Historically, pedagogy and didactics have been marked by diametrically opposed theories and ideas, along with efforts to interpret the development of the teaching process and pedagogical theories as a linear process. For example, regarding the polarity in pedagogy, called pedagogical dualism in Milat (2007) while relating upbringing to education, the following types of division can be seen: teacher-centred learning and content-centred learning vs. student-centred learning, theory vs. practice, the intellectualist approach vs. work-based learning, exemplification vs. abstraction, upbringing vs. education, traditionality vs. modernity, etc.

The linear understanding of the development of pedagogical thought is based on the idea that a new (more contemporary) pedagogical approach has replaced the old (more traditional) one, meaning that pedagogical idealism has been replaced by pedagogical empiricism, behavioural theory by constructivist theory, etc. (Jordan, Carlile and Stack, 2008). However, this is not always the case either in theory or in practice. By analysing the development of pedagogical and didactic thought, we can see that what we currently consider modern and innovative is not new at all, but has existed before, though in different social and economic circumstances (Koludrović and Rajić, 2019), and Work-based Learning is a good example of that.

Another problem with the linear understanding of the development of pedagogical and didactic ideas, theories, and approaches, which are sustainable over a long period, lies in the fact that they are always associated with economic and social features. Therefore, according to some authors, any definition of didactics is temporary and open (Poljak, 1991) because didactics always starts from certain philosophical, psychological, and sociological theories and cannot be universal and neutral to different theoretical approaches (Bognar and Matijević, 2002). Stoll and Fink (2001) relate society to the education system, pointing out that the latter must always keep up with or be faster than societal changes, so that its stakeholders can find it relevant and useful. Konig and Zedler (2001, 253) explain that "science never has abstract and unlimited validity but is embedded in concrete sets of actions under cultural and historical conditions". In postmodern society and education, the situation is further complicated, especially under pressure from the relationship among upbringing, education, the individual, society, and the economy. Moreover, Heyler (2015) claims that the postmodern approach to learning can be seen as

pedagogical romanticism (Jordan et al., 2008), which is focused on full personality development, and its implications can be seen primarily in the works of Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori. What pedagogical empiricism and romanticism have in common is that they move away from intellectualist teaching and promote the importance of experience-based work and learning, but in completely different ways.
A particularly important period in the development of WBL was the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, when many teachers in Europe and the USA were engaged in intensifying the importance of work, i.e. experiential learning in pedagogical terms. The reason for the intensification of WBL was primarily the desire to react to a lack of connection between the content and the structure of the teaching process in schools, on the one hand, and events in industrial society and the labour market, on the other.
A special contribution to work-based learning in the German-speaking world at the end of the 19th century should be assigned to the labour school movement, which emerged as a reaction to the then social and economic situation (Jakopović, 1984). Its most famous representative is Georg Kerschensteiner (1852–1932), who, according to Rohrs (1993), pointed out that children are motorically inclined, and their primary urge is towards acutal manual contact with concrete things. Kerschensteiner is especially known as an advocate of the work school instead of the book-learning school. Even at that time, he was aware that the largest percentage of children preferred any type of practical activity and pointed out that if students were put in workshops and kitchens, gardens, fields, stables, and fishing boats, they would always be willing to work (Kerschensteiner, 1912, 106 as cited in Rohrs, 1993, 6). It should be stressed that Kerschensteiner was not an advocate of pedagogical polarity in terms of intellectualism vs. work school but felt that these complemented each other. He saw manual work primarily as an opportunity to develop independence, work ethic, activities, self-reflection, planning and organizing skills (Kerschensteiner, 1950 as cited in Rohrs, 1993).
Hugo Gaudig (1860–1923) perceived the educational process as spiritual self-work, which encourages learner self-reflection. Gaudig had a significant impact on Kerschensteiner's departure from pedagogical dualism between intellectualism and work school. Gaudig (1969, 25) believed that the goal of manual work was not exclusively a product, but, among other things, the opportunity for reflection provided by the work itself. He claimed that in this process, the learner observes and

at the same time understands the technique of the work that takes place in front of his eyes and ears, and by explaining the technique, the learner gets an insight into the chosen method of work (Gaudig, 1969).

Dutch educator Jan Lighart (1859–1916) devised the concept of the *school full of life (school and life)*, stressing that a full life should be formed by taking the teaching content from nature which is complete and diverse (Poljak, 1959, 51–52). In accordance with other counsellors and teachers of the time, he believed that students acquired too much theoretical knowledge and too little practice (Poljak, 1959; van Oenen, 2021). Lighart also devised three principles for choosing the content, which include introducing children to (1) nature as a large reservoir of raw materials from which humans draw their wealth; (2) society that works to process these raw materials from nature; and (3) society as a consumer of these products (Poljak, 1959, 51–52). According to Poljak (1959) and van Oenen (2021), this was a bold idea at the time and, owing to the choice of content, Lighart was criticized and reproached for relying on didactic materialism.

Furthermore, for its affirmation of work-based learning, the Soviet Union's School of Work, also called the complex Soviet school system (Poljak, 1959) is well known. In his book *School of Work*, Pavel Petrovič Blonski (1884–1941) pointed out that "the content of a school of work should not be an abstract work process, but a concrete production, which is integral and interconnected" (Blonski, 1921, 10 as cited in Poljak, 1959, 58). According to Blonski (Poljak, 1959), there are three basic components of complex teaching: nature as a source of raw materials, human work in nature, and new social relations based on the socialist concept of collective work. In this process, work occupies a central place as a source of social progress, affecting both the exploitation of nature and the formation of socialist labour relations, while the highest degree, according to Blonski, is industrial work because industry is the highest power over nature, and the factory and factory workshop are schools of work for youth (Blonski, 1921, 19–22 as cited in Poljak, 1959, 59). In terms of moving away from dry intellectualist teaching, the project method by John Dewey and William Heard Killpatrick should be highlighted. Their main idea was to choose projects primarily starting from current life-practical issues, which contributes to the fact that project solutions have not only a general theoretical cognitive value but also a quite concrete practical benefit in terms of changing certain living conditions to improve human existence (Poljak, 1959, 74–75). With his pragmatic approach, Dewey tried to integrate the intellectual, practical, and experiential in the processes of higher-level thinking and reflection (Topolovčan, Rajić and Matijević, 2017).

In his definition of the project method, Killpatrick (1918) stressed not only the purposefulness of projects, but also the importance of student activities in the project work, the moral responsibility acquired by working on the project, emphasizing that the success and purposefulness of projects are determined by students' commitment in learning, i.e. working, with their whole heart. In his analysis of the project method, Collings (1935, 190 as cited in Poljak, 1959) pointed out (1) that for the school to function well, students must plan what they are doing and should want to do something, not just do what the teacher wants. The topic of the project is jointly planned and jointly worked on. (2) Learning must not be an isolated and abstract activity but must have a real-life basis. (3) All learning must have a practical benefit, as this motivates students in their work; everything is learnt according to a specific useful purpose, which delights children and sparks their interest, and (4) The emphasis should be placed on constantly raising, enriching, and forming experiences.

Croatian writer Mate Demarin (1939, 4, as cited in Bognar and Matijević, 2002, 20) stated in his book *A Practical Example of Work Training* that "to affect the formation and education of a full personality, on the one hand, work should include fertile and adaptable material, and in particular, work should be close to life. It should be borne in mind that schoolwork is real and complete only if students are trained for work in life."

A special contribution to the affirmation of life-practical skills in the educational system was made by Maria Montessori (1870–1952) and Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). Although these represent two different pedagogical and didactic views, both Montessori pedagogy and Steiner's Waldorf pedagogy described the importance of acquiring life-practical skills from an early age and elaborated exercises to encourage such skills. Unlike other approaches, these two include life-practical skills as their inseparable parts, which are implemented in almost all educational activities at all levels of education.

The analysis of the historical development of WBL reveals that, according to authors from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, learning and teaching processes must be useful to students, applicable in real life, exemplified, and economical; they should also include and link cognitive, affective, and psychomotor tasks, be purposeful and encourage students to be active, responsible, and independent. Moreover, it is noticeable that from the beginning, WBL arose as a reaction to dissatisfaction with the application of didactic intellectualism in the teaching process.

Ultimately, the authors believe that work-based learning does not replace or diminish intellectual work but builds on and improves it.
However, the difference can be seen in understanding the importance of WBL which is not always dedicated to socio-economic progress (e.g., Blonski), but it has a primarily pedagogical purpose (e.g., Montessori and Steiner) with the aim of full personality development, i.e. training for an independent and purposeful life where work is an integral part of the overall process of student development, while training for a particular job is not its primary role.

**Contemporary understanding of WBL**

The last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century saw the development of the knowledge society, which along with the influence of economic and social circumstances and the competence approach to education, contributed to re-actualizing the issue of work-based learning. Numerous authors (Rainbird, Munro, and Senker, 2005; Raelin, 2008; Avis, 2010; Heyler, 2015, Major, 2016) who explore the features of contemporary work-based learning emphasize its connection with the social and economic circumstances of contemporary life. They see WBL as an aid to students and teachers in bridging the sluggishness of the education system in relation to the rapidly-changing modern labour market, but also to connect the formal education system and the labour market. For the first time, WBL is not created as an initiative of individual instructors, as has been the case historically, but has become an integral part of educational policy and legislation (European Commission, 2015; Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015) and curricula documents, both in VET (more about concrete solutions can be found in InovatiVET, 2017) and in the higher education system, where multiple solutions for the implementation of WBL can be found in study programs.
Although some authors claim this is a novelty in learning (Raelin, 2008), that WBL is a new pedagogy for new times (Boud and Symes, 2000), based on a historical overview and contemporary ways of realization of work-based learning, it can be seen this is nothing new in pedagogy and didactics. On the contrary, considering new scientific knowledge and the practical implications of the benefits of work-based learning, WBL is clearly being re-actualized in new social, educational, and economic circumstances.

In terms of understanding and implementing WBL, it should be emphasized that almost all authors exploring WBL agree there is no single definition of this issue important for the quality of education, which makes its interpretation extremely difficult. The reasons can partly be sought in semantics. For example, workplace learning, and work-based learning are two different models that involve work, each of which has its own characteristics; however, in applying the term workplace learning, the learning process must be organized in the workplace. Moreover, sometimes the categorization and systematization of terms depend on the (didactic) approach, pedagogical school, and the competence of the authors dealing with this issue, and finally there are authors who equate WBL and workplace learning.

Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, we will distinguish between different models of work-related learning, including workplace learning, work-based learning, volunteering, internship after graduation and other models. Such categorization is in accordance with the views of other authors. Avis (2002, 2010) and Morris (2019) point out that WBL should be distinguished from workplace learning, which is a form of learning that occurs every day at work when employees seek new skills or develop new approaches to solving problems. Sweet (2013; 166) defines WBL as "a subset of experience-based learning and points out that WBL should be clearly distinguished from learning that takes place in enterprise-based training workshops and training classrooms".

Neither is there any clear consensus on how WBL should be categorized with regard to the didactic classification of terms. Some authors and sources (Raelin, 1997; InovatiVET, 2017; Major, 2016) call it a model. Raelin (1997) defines WBL as a comprehensive model which combines explicit and tacit forms of knowledge and theory and practice modes. The toolkit WBL practices in Europe (InovatiVET, 2017) defines WBL as a model of integrative pedagogy.

Musset (2020) points out that WBL has different application models, but does not put it in any category, opposing it to the concept of school-based learning. Similar views are expressed by other authors (European Training Foundation, 2013), who also agree that there is no single definition of WBL. Neither do Kis and Windisch (2018) offer categorization or definition, while Kis (2016, 7) defines work-based learning as "learning that takes place through some combination of observing, undertaking, and reflecting on productive work in real workplaces. It may be paid or unpaid and includes a diversity of arrangements".

Harvey (2023), for example, does not categorize WBL in didactic terms, but states that "work-based learning refers to any formal higher education learning that is based wholly or predominantly in a work setting". Johnson, White, Charner, Cole, and Promboin (2018) define WBL as a set of instructional strategies that engages employers and schools in providing learning experiences for students.

Consequently, after analysing this and other relevant literature, it is noticeable that authors often do not categorize WBL didactically, while others call it a model or concept, or a set of strategies. In any case, WBL is not a single didactic strategy because it does not have clear implementation steps, unlike project-based learning or problem-based learning. Work-based learning is neither an educational approach nor a curriculum structuring approach because it is an integral part of the contemporary competency-based approach in education that is defined and elaborated by educational policy and related legal and curricular documents. All authors dealing with this issue clearly point out that the goal of work-based learning is to improve the education system by connecting theory with practice, and to strengthen, improve, and master the professional and generic competences of pupils and students, and indirectly the mentors and employees from whom pupils and students learn, encouraging them towards lifelong learning. In other words, WBL also contributes to both work organization and the education system (Sweet, 2013; Boud et al., 2001; Boud and Solomon, 2007).

We believe that WBL has also gone beyond the notion of something related to an insufficiently elaborated idea. In scientific contexts, a model (*Croatian Encyclopedia*, 2021b) is a set of assumptions theoretically describing a system. In this sense, it is best to distinguish between different models of work-related learning (workplace learning, work-based learning, volunteering, internship after graduation etc.), whereby WBL is one model that has several different types of implementation and application, depending on the education system in which it is applied (adult education, VET, higher education system) and depending on the curriculum structure (strictly programmed in advance or flexibly structured).

Ultimately, WBL is a didactic model of planning, organizing, and realizing a learning process that links the learning outcomes of a particular qualification with immediate practical learning. It is based on a constructivist paradigm and a competency-based approach to learning and teaching, and curriculum-wise, it is flexibly planned and individualized.

Its goal is to develop and improve the professional and generic competences acquired by pupils and students, linking the benefits of academic learning and the labour market, and it forms an integral part of lifelong learning.

**Features of the contemporary Work-based Learning Model**

Based on the above, the main features of WBL as a didactic model can be identified. First, WBL relies on a competency-based approach to education. Competency is a set of knowledge, skills, independence, and responsibility, and the main purpose of WBL is full personality development and the acquisition of professional and generic competences to provide young people with the highest possible quality education, so that they can quickly adapt to the labour market, participate successfully in it, and ultimately improve it. Sweet (2013, 191) sees WBL as a powerful form of pedagogy that can be used to develop basic work habits, occupational identity, and specific occupational competences.

WBL is determined by the curriculum and learning outcomes (Brennan and Little, 1996; Boud, Solomon and Symes, 2001; Boud and Solomon, 2007; Sweet, 2013; Johnson, White, Charner, Cole and Promboin, 2018, Steinert, 2019). If it is not defined by the curriculum, this is a workplace learning model. Boud et al. (2001) point out that curricula should be flexibly structured in such a way that learning outcomes are applicable in diverse work environments and can meet the specific interests of learners. They also have features of transdisciplinarity, as activities from different fields are most often connected in the workplace (Boud et al., 2001; Johnson et al., 2018). The goal is to connect workplace needs and classroom study (Boud, Solomon and Symes, 2001; Sweet, 2013). The authors agree that it is best to organize WBL to connect the labour market and the academic context. Boud et al. (2001) argue that the goal is not only to train students for the labour market, but also to improve both the learning process and companies. Sweet (2013) claims that WBL contributes not only to student creativity and innovation (Johnson et al. 2018) but also to the innovation and productivity of a particular company.

Another feature of WBL is that it is didactically shaped (Boud et al., 2001; Sweet, 2013; Boud and Solomon, 2007). According to Sweet (2013), WBL is a type of experiential learning, where mentoring work, demonstration and practice, task rotation and task variety, project work and problem solving are important didactic strategies and methods.

Raelin (2008) adds modelling, demonstrating, storytelling, coaching, Bruner's scaffolding, and experiential learning. WBL can be shaped using a range of strategies and methods of learning and teaching, but it is necessary that they be focused on student activity, that is, on their learning. It is therefore clear that an important feature of WBL is the full development of learners. In addition to contributing to the development and improvement of holistic competences, WBL also has a motivational role (Sweet, 2013), and successful WBL implies meeting student interests (Johnson et al., 2018) and helping students become active in identifying their needs and interests and in organizing the learning process (Lester and Costley, 2010). According to Johnson et al. (2018), by solving specific problems WBL contributes to the development of critical and analytical thinking, seeing problems from different perspectives, it encourages data research, analysis of previous solutions, and decision-making to ultimately arrive at a solution to the problem.

The following feature of WBL relates to its task of training students for the labour market. Here, it is crucial to keep in mind that WBL is not just an observation of what is happening in practice (in the labour market). Part of the learning outcomes should certainly be focused on getting to know the features of the workplace, but the learning outcomes and the work plan should be defined according to individual student abilities so that they can participate actively in the WBL process, taking into account the level of independence.

WBL also improves numerous generic competences such as learning how to learn (Boud et al., 2001), creativity and innovation, originality, responsibility, respect, appreciation of different opinions, work ethic, and professionalism (Johnson et al., 2018) and, ultimately, metacognition because it requires continuous student reflection on the problem-solving process (Raelin, 2008). Many authors also emphasize self-reflection, reflective practice, and peer evaluation as essential features of WBL (Seufert, 2000; Heyler, 2015; Major, 2016; Johnson et al., 2018), which are also indispensable features of the constructivist paradigm and the competency-based approach to education. WBL will truly have an impact and motivate students to further learn if an authentic and positive learning atmosphere is established and teachers and mentors are trained to apply this model. An additional important feature of WBL is intergenerational learning, as this is a reciprocal model of education in which different generations can learn from each other and collaborate.

In this regard, it is necessary to train teachers and mentors in the field of WBL application and to foster continuous cooperation among all stakeholders based on reflective practice and mutual respect.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the development of Work-based Learning presented in this article reveals that WBL is not a novelty. It occurs cyclically in those periods when economic progress and change are intensified and when there is a discrepancy between learning in school and at university and the needs of the labour market. Even though WBL may arise as a reaction to dissatisfaction with classroom teaching, it is noticeable that the main goal of both older and newer models of WBL is the competency and well-being of students and that it was not created purely to meet the needs of the labour market. The difference between older and contemporary models lies mainly in the fact that the new ones are determined by education policy and legislation, which ensures that they will not remain an idea or an attempt, but are an integral part of the education system, primarily in VET, adult education, and higher education. WBL can also be applied in the education of students at lower educational levels mostly through manual work, home economics, experiential learning, gardening, technical culture, and numerous other activities that promote experiential learning. Finally, it is justified to expect that modern WBL will function longer because the speed of change within the economy ensures its place in lifelong learning.

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