MacIntyre and Practice: Implications for Workplace learning


Introduction

This paper considers some implications for workplace learning of Alasdair’s MacIntyre’s moral philosophy. It reviews some currently popular ways in which WL is conceptualized according to the metaphor of communities of practice (COP) and attempts to illustrate their inadequacies when applied to workplaces as they actually occur in contemporary society. Some difficulties with applying the work of a theorist who is generally thought to be hostile to the idea of a modern managed workplace are acknowledged and explained. Nevertheless it is argued that some such workplaces already are and others could become the kind of small scale associations of people which MacIntyre commends in other parts of his writing. According to this argument WL carries normative force so that both economic efficiency and concerns for such qualities as justice, empathy, kindness and decency are enabled.

The main implication of MacIntyre’s work for WL concerns management. It is argued that conventional management does not encourage WL whereas radical management practice might. It might seem odd to suppose that a concern with ethical norms centrally affects learning in a modern managed workplace, but it is MacIntyre’s rich account of practice that provides a normative direction for WL.

MacIntyre is generally thought of as a communitarian theorist. Hence it is not immediately obvious how his work could be relevant to working life within liberal democracy. It is argued however that the liberal communitarian dichotomy is nothing like so sharp as some take it to be. Even Liberals such as Rawls (1993) recognize the essential role of familial enculturation as a prerequisite for the recognition of the need for justice among strangers. Moreover even neo liberals recognize that global markets must function according to some ethical norms. Within workplaces human relations range over those we get to know very well and those who remain to all extents strangers. Those relations require some human virtues to flourish for conflict between people who hold different fundamental values to remain co-operative. MacIntyre provides an account of how such virtues can be encouraged.

Empirical evidence to support some of the arguments made in this paper is provided by the outcomes of an Australian Research Council funded project. See Hager 2007, Hager and Halliday 2006, Johnsson and Hager 2005, 2006). This evidence is provided by case studies and so its generalisability may be questioned. The arguments presented here however are intended to hold good without the desired generalisability.
Dualisms, Communities of Practice and Context

Alasdair MacIntyre may seem an unlikely theorist to shed light on the modern workplace. That is because MacIntyre regards liberal capitalist democracies (LCD) as in a state of crisis. He suggests that a main reason for this crisis is that there is no longer a common moral language that people can use to settle their fundamental differences. In its place, emotivism is the idea that moral judgments are no more than expressions of personal preference. It is an illusion to believe that the state or market can act as a neutral adjudicator between preferences as neutralist liberalism requires. For MacIntyre this illusion leads to a culture which is ‘manipulative … the ends are taken as given and not available for rational scrutiny’ (MacIntyre 1984: 30) and the manipulators are the managers and therapists (Wain 2004: 93).

In much of his work MacIntyre argues that the remedy for this problem is a retreat to pre-modernity where religious authority provides both the common moral language that currently is missing and the means rationally to resolve differences on the basis of a shared conception of the ends to which human life should be directed. For many critics such a retreat is neither possible nor desirable. In response to such criticisms MacIntyre (1994, 1999a) suggests that LCD might nevertheless sustain small scale associations of people who do share both a common moral language and vision of the ends to which those associations should be directed. As examples of such associations, MacIntyre suggests rather nostalgically fishing and mining communities that no longer exist (MacIntyre 1999a: 143). He goes on however to argue that there might be more plausible alternatives and I argue that some workplaces may provide current examples of such alternatives.

Knight (1998: 23) describes MacIntyre’s response to his critics as follows: MacIntyre’s politics may now, to an extent, be described in terms of resistance … What is to be resisted is injustice. Capitalism is to be understood as a society which is structured by institutional manipulation of people in pursuit of goods of effectiveness. Therefore, given the Aristotelian conception of justice as the virtue of treating people as they deserve, capitalism is to be understood as structurally unjust. MacIntyre’s politics of resistance is one of collective action in defence of practices against institutional domination and corruption.

For MacIntyre (1999a: 141) resistance is not possible at the level of national politics because at that level a modern electorate can only function as it does so long as it has only a highly simplified and impoverished account of the issues that are presented to it. And the modes of presentation through which elites address electorates are designed to conceal as much as reveal … It is therefore a mistake, the communitarian mistake to attempt to infuse the politics of the state with the values and modes of participation in local community.

The crucial distinctions for MacIntyre (1984) are between internal and external goods and between practices and institutions. It is important to note that MacIntyre’s use of these terms is technical. Actual workplaces typically
consist of some mixture of ‘practices’ and ‘institutions’ as MacIntyre uses those terms. Internal goods are worthwhile in themselves whereas external goods are worthwhile to the extent that they enable the achievement of other goods. Practices are concerned with internal goods. Institutions are concerned with external goods and the integrity of practices is always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of institutions. For example a good joiner might primarily be concerned to achieve the internal goods of her practice – accurate joints, straight lines, aesthetically pleasing shapes etc. Her manager however primarily concerned to foster the institutional end of increasing external goods such as money might try to persuade her to act quickly without much regard for internal goods. Rather she is persuaded to get the job done in the minimum time to the minimal accepted standard that is consistent with her getting paid.

If it is accepted that within LCD’s there is no shared understanding of the ends to which society should be directed, then it seems obvious that a concern with the achievement of external goods will come to dominate. Yet this dominance risks the very practices that give meaning to the various activities that people undertake at work and elsewhere. So it is hard to see any current entity corresponding exclusively either to practice or institution. Moreover there is nothing wrong with wanting to earn a living in a way that allows people to participate in other activities in which they have an interest. Nevertheless there is an easily recognized distinction between single mindedly pursuing a quest for external goods irrespective of the harm that might be doing to others and holding the pursuit of internal and external goods in some sort of balance. Such a balance attempts to ensure both satisfaction from the actual work completed and the remuneration it brings.

To take another example academic work may become dominated by a primary concern to increase the amount of research income through grants from organizations with a vested interest in publishing results in their favor or such work might remain primarily concerned with such issues as truth, justice and human flourishing in general. It is often not easy to distinguish between internal and external goods for all of us work to some extent in contexts which allow little control over what we do and that are thoroughly saturated with power relations in the form of the manipulation of external goods. Nevertheless the fact that the distinction between internal and external goods is readily understood and talked about illustrates its utility.

The division of labor on a production line provides a more difficult example for a MacIntyrian perspective on WL. Nevertheless even in that case the worker must have some conception of the ends to which the work is directed. How else might she be able to tell if the line is working correctly? Moreover she still must have regard for the safety and well-being of co-workers. To perform well, it is preferable to have some understanding of and empathy with the effects of her work on others. With such understanding and empathy she pays attention to the goods internal to the work practice even though those goods are tied in with the performance of a machine over which she has little control. Whether a tool is a chisel or a CNC milling machine or even a conveyor belt is a matter of degree of complexity which does not by itself negate the usefulness of the distinctions.
to which MacIntyre draws attention. In all production processes there are, to differing degrees, the need for human judgments and those judgments are bound to be infused with complexity in purpose and method that transcend a narrowly conceived conception of context.

MacIntyre accepts that

> It would be a large misconception to suppose the allegiance to goods of one kind necessarily excluded allegiance to goods of the other … [so that] it is difficult in most social contexts to pursue the goods of effectiveness without cultivating at least to some degree the goods of excellence … to enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners but also with those who have preceded us in the practice particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point. (MacIntyre 1988: 193-194).

While there is something stable and enduring about practices, practices develop through both critical debate within them and from critical debate across related practices. It is hard to imagine that anyone could be just one type of practitioner, nor concerned only with one type of good. It is more plausible to view people are practitioners to different extents in a number of practices and that their workplace involvements include consideration of both internal and external goods. The institutions that both sustain and threaten those involvements may be located across time and space.

Whereas the work of MacIntyre is not generally well known by VET theorists, the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) is. Like MacIntyre Lave and Wenger identify the importance of doing, belonging, experiencing and becoming as critical dimensions, characterizing learning as emergent, participatory and socially developed. Unlike MacIntyre, for Lave and Wenger there remains difficult issues in determining when a group becomes a community and where organizations (and their contextualized learning) can be said to be bounded. For example are we primarily members of a community of academics? Women? Managers? Parents or what? Moreover while use of the term ‘community’ tends to suggest symmetrical relations of power; in reality, groups are often dominated by asymmetry. An important critique of the work of Lave and Wenger has been the lack of conceptually robust analyses of power and its influence on learning. (Fenwick and Rubenson 2005) MacIntyre theorises the influences of power through the manipulation of external goods.

**MacIntyre on practice, institution and liberal democracy**

It is because some practical involvements remain stable for long enough that standards to determine other forms of practical development are possible according to MacIntyre. MacIntyre’s work helps to address some of the problematic issues in the COP literature by recognizing that it is related practices that provide the standards with which to judge the development of each other. Control over the distribution of external goods is what enables the exercise of power and risks distorting not only the set of human relationships that sustain practices but also any objective determination of which practice is to be preferred. In contrast to COP theorists, MacIntyre theorises the effects of power as both potentially disabling of practice but enabling of learning through the desire for external goods.
For MacIntyre (1999a), a desire for external goods may be regarded as the entering wedge to learning. That is, they focus on instrumental ways to meet personal short-term needs, i.e. for food and safety. Later however, children become independent practical reasoners in the sense that they come to make judgments about whether it is best

for me here and now to act so as to satisfy this particular desire. [In that way] the child has to learn that it may have good reason to act other than as its most urgently felt wants dictate and it can do this only when those wants have ceased to be its dictator (MacIntyre 1999a: 69).

Adults learning new things may be seen to be guided by similar considerations. A desire for some external good may provide the ‘interest’ (Dewey 1966) that is a first stage in learning, but the learning becomes worthwhile when the adult is able to reason why it is good to want that external good in the context of their involvement in a range of practices. Such learning may only take place however because there are others whose ‘presence or absence, intervention or lack of intervention, are of crucial importance’ (MacIntyre 1999a: 73). Those others must be able to distinguish to some extent between practices and institutions, internal and external goods. For without such abilities learning what is ethically acceptable would not be possible.

There may be ‘relationships of rational exchange [that are] designed for and justified by the advantages of the parties to the relationship’ (MacIntyre, 1999a: 114). Both individuals and the people they work with can achieve mutually beneficial outcomes but only when workplaces maintain to some extent a concern with internal goods and a shared sense that workplaces cannot be bounded. As MacIntyre puts it:

We know from whom it is that we have received and therefore to whom we are in debt. But often we do not know to whom it is that we will be called upon to give … we can set in advance no limit to those possible needs (MacIntyre 1999a: 100).

This notion of asymmetrical relational dependency involves a kind of giving to other practitioners and trust in their disposition to act for the good that cannot be codified in the form of propositional knowledge. It involves a certain generosity which takes other points of view seriously and commits to dialogue with them. As I interpret MacIntyre, the nature of practical reasoning is to reason together within some determinate set of social relationships that are continuously constructed and inseparable from the development of dispositions to act for the good, not only asking ‘what is it best for me to do?’ but also ‘what is it best for us to do?’ Further, that good cannot just be understood as a summing of individual goods, or constructed from them; individual goods are not subordinated to communal goods. Each individual has to learn what place it is best that goods should have in his or her life and the norms of giving and receiving that guide rational and effective relationships.
Learning then depends upon independent practical reasoning and acknowledged dependence on others. First there is an individual transition from being able to reason in terms of immediate wants and desires to longer term understanding ‘of ourselves as directed to a range of goals that are more or less remote from our present situation and to order our desires accordingly’ (MacIntyre 1999a:76) According to this aspect, reasoning involves competing considerations of what is the best thing to do. Resolving competition requires the common recognition of some internal goods which in turn requires particular kinds of development and sustenance of workplaces. A second aspect therefore is the maturation of the workplace itself so that it recognizes its role in the sustenance of practices. Maturation involves the development of a shared sense of internal goods that enables interpretive understandings and productive endeavor. Maturation also involves awareness that there are desirable human qualities that enable communitarian ends to be pursued within LCD.

Workplaces and Utopia
A sense of purpose provides the learner with a life that has the unity of an unfolding narrative for MacIntyre. On MacIntyre’s view, there cannot be one set of practices into which all learners can be initiated for practices themselves are varied and localised. Moreover practices have different traditions of the ends that are worth valuing. In LCD there are bound to be rival traditions (MacIntyre 1988). Hence there are also bound to be many small scale associations of people pursuing differing ideas about what is desirable (MacIntyre 1994: 143). In this way MacIntyre wants to preserve contesting voices in a pluralistic world yet enable them to communicate with each other and theorise each others purposes and methods. The spirit of such communication is conflict and combat and the framework of communication to be sought is one of respect and agreement to disagree on fundamentals. MacIntyre’s work is highly relevant to VET theorists because workplaces themselves provide main opportunities for learning. It is through practices including practices supported at work that ethically positive relations are realised within which there is recognition that others are bound to differ in their view of the human good.

It is not a failure to accept that there is an imperfect balance between internal and external goods nor to recognize that others will balance these differently. A lack of perfection does not mean a lack of ethics or justice. The ends to which workplaces serve are inevitably bound up with the means in ways that also involve other workplaces. MacIntyre is correct about the immorality of attempting to sustain what he calls the character of the conventional morally neutral manager because such sustenance denies the possibility of collective determination of what ought to be done. Workplaces without such management are possible however.

Macintyre (1999a: 143) acknowledges that there is ‘a variety of social forms within which networks of giving and receiving can be institutionalised.’ While those termed conventional management (Dyck and Weber 2006) are unlikely to sustain such networks, those characterised as radical might. Dyck and Weber (2006: 429) argue that there is currently ‘a crisis in virtue
and moral agency’ and that there is evidence to support radical management practice. SEMCO (Semler 2004) provides perhaps the best known example. Tradecraft (Moore and Beadle 2006) provide another but there is currently a myriad of awards of the form ‘best company to work for’ which support the efficacy of changes to conventional management practice. Parker (1998: 71) argues that there should be a move away from a conception of workplace as ‘tight structures of control to workplace as loose networks of consent’. For him (1998: 89)

senses of community do grow within and around work organisations … the possibility of a more democratic organisation is implicit within the idea of an organizational community … utopias (like communities perhaps) are ideas for our politics to aim at, not places we might ever live in – or indeed want to.

MacIntyre (1999a: 145) acknowledges and advises

Local communities are always to some degree imperfect, competing interests are bound to some extent to emerge. Economically what matters is that there should be relatively small inequalities of income … there may have to be self-imposed limits to labour mobility [to maintain a sense of tradition. … Everyone so far as possible will have to take their turn in performing the dangerous and the tedious jobs in order to avoid another form of social inequality.

He accepts that these are utopian standards but ‘trying to live by utopian standards is not utopian … and that the norms that he argues for are to some extent already accepted in households, workplaces, schools, parishes’ (ibid) and as Parker (1998: 84) argues the idea of utopia usefully can function as a normative ideal which should not be realised.

There are tensions and contradictions in pursuing apparently communitarian ethics in LCD within which many workplaces are concerned principally to compete in a global market place. For communitarians, ethical norms are always the norms of some community and ethically positive behavior depends precisely on membership of ethically positive communities. Liberals however are typically concerned with individual autonomy and universal notions of justice. The idea of a global market place is attractive to some liberals as a neutral adjudicator between workplaces with differing ethical norms. For them good instrumental relations at work are the best means of ensuring private fulfillment at home.

The distance between liberals and communitarians is not as great as it might seem however (Mulhall and Swift 1992). In the first place markets must function according to some ethical standards. Moreover not all or even most workplaces are or could be concerned with responding to anything as broad as a global market place. For many their concern remains the satisfaction of local needs in which competition plays an important though not dominant role. Third if there were no common ethical standards merely standards particular to local workplaces then engagement in reasoned dialogue with others would not be possible. What is needed is something like Rawls’s overlapping consensus (Rawls 1993). For Rawls even though people may disagree on comprehensive systems of values, there is sufficient overlap in their practices to enable them to work out what they need to do together.
Moreover as Strike (2000) notes, even for liberals such as Rawls, immersion in the ethical norms of some community is a preliminary to any sense of justice.

The liberal communitarian debate tends to compartmentalize relationships too much into a sphere of communal relations and a sphere of relations with strangers. Workplaces typically sit between these two extremes. The debate tends to divide people too readily into strangers and intimates as Strike (2000) argues. MacIntyre’s later work helps avoid such division and compartmentalization. It is a matter of degree the extent to which someone is a stranger or a friend. Workplaces involve both strangers and intimates. Workplaces are more or less like practices. Justice aims to regulate relations among the citizens of large pluralistic societies but it is also relevant to small scale associations of people. For Strike (2000) empathy, kindness and decency are necessary to enable people with differing fundamental values to come together to work out what is in their collective best interest. A sense of justice depends upon these qualities.

Most workplaces contain the potential for sectarian strife and extending kindness and decency to others including those less advantaged. That is one reason why a communitarian utopia might function as an ideal that should not be realized. One danger with pursuing liberalism too far is that a quest for neutrality can lead to an inhuman attempt to apply rules impartially. One danger with pursuing the communitarian counterpart is that a quest for tokens of belonging can lead to a bullying culture. A proliferation of bureaucratic devices cannot disguise the basic fact that workplaces need both shared ethical standards and freedom to respond to the needs of others. If the arguments of this paper are accepted then those workplaces that encourage debate and search for overlapping consensus are likely to be ethically superior. They may well be ‘expansive’ (Fuller and Unwin, 2004: 130). Such workplaces encourage difference but seek common ground when necessary rather than pretend ethical neutrality maintained by the power of management.

It is not that there is an ideal balance between such extremes to be struck in all cases. Rather it is that workplaces can to different degrees sustain such qualities as kindness, empathy and decency. There are benefits in holding to some extent the liberal distinction between private fulfillment at home and instrumental relations at work, but the distinction need not be drawn starkly for all types of associations of people. Workplaces can occupy a space in between.

**Conclusion**

A workplace may usefully be regarded as an operational combination of what MacIntyre calls practice and institution. WL ultimately depends upon the cultivation of virtues. WL has three main aspects. For individuals there is an increasing ability to perform as a competent practitioner and to be able to reason less in terms of immediate wants and desires and more to longer term understanding of remote goals concerned with what is good for all of us. This involves a growing sense of relational dependence in which there is humility towards others and recognition of the asymmetry in giving and
receiving that comes to replace rational exchange. The second aspect is the maturation of workplaces to enable them to support individual learning through the balance that has been described. The third aspect is the maturation of workplaces so that such human qualities as kindness, decency and empathy are encouraged.

While for the purposes of explanation I have set these aspects out separately, the aspects should be seen as connected for a proper understanding. It is not just that workplaces should be formed and maintained in certain kinds of way to facilitate individual learning or the opposite. Rather it is that the very idea of learning depends upon the way workers are managed.

For someone unsympathetic to MacIntyre, workplaces are bound primarily to be interested in the bottom line, in the most obviously applied pursuits. These are pursued with managerial vigor, setting up structures with clear power differentials which suppress debate. The quick technical and or managerial fix is preferred. Shortcomings are addressed through a prescribed course of study. Learning is seen very much as the acquisition of sanctioned routines which can then be followed with all the apparent precision of a code. Actions are closely monitored and justifiable only to the extent that they lead to pre-existing statement of outcome. There is no generosity in spirit or outcome which accepts a degree of uncertainty as inevitable and desirable. Kindness, empathy, decency and justice are tokens to be championed through the publication of a list of ‘our values’.

A MacIntyrian perspective on WL is encouraged by the opposite. The idea that desirable ends can be articulated and managed once and for all as for example in a mission statement is given up. The idea that external goods can be apportioned on the basis of power and people manipulated into accepting a disproportionate share is also given up. I can understand why Moore and Beadle (2006: 382) argue that it is important to ‘quite deliberately limit the focus on external goods’. It is wrong however to suggest that there is something morally deficient in having concerns for the amount of money earned for example. What is morally deficient is having an exclusive concern. A just purpose and a power balanced structure are important although I would want to argue that there need be nothing sanctimonious about having a concern for justice. Manufacturers of televisions may be as concerned with justice as those attempting to give assistance to the developing world. Justice, kindness and decency may be encouraged through such manufacture. There is a moral dimension to productive endeavor even when the ends of production are not universally believed to be good.

MacIntyre (1999b) is aware that it is all too easy to appear to be virtuous by appearing to be concerned only with internal goods or by appearing to be concerned about something outwith our control. It is easy to claim that there should be virtuous agents. Who would want otherwise? It is not through statement but action that virtue can be determined which is why I use the example of TV set manufacture. Moreover uncomfortable though it may be to admit it, it is possible to learn to be virtuous through participation in what
MacIntyre (1994) terms ‘evil practices’. That provides a further reason why a MacIntyrian perspective on WL is not Utopian.

It is towards radical management practice that a study of MacIntyre leads us. He provides a normative direction to workplace learning. Such learning involves balancing a variety of sometimes competing considerations. It aims towards a different kind of society but is based on the one we currently have. It will be attractive to those who see something wrong with the current direction of conventionally managed workplaces.

For Moore and Beadle (2006: 386), management itself may be considered as the practice of ‘making and sustaining institutions’. I differ from Moore and Beadle (2006) in that I do not accept that there is much to be gained by pursuing the argument that management is a practice. It seems to me that MacIntyre’s (2002) arguments against teaching being considered a practice also apply to management. The equation of practice with goodness is misleading in the context of discussion of workplaces that currently exist. Similarly the equation of goodness with community as part of COP theorizing is also misleading. Goodness should come from balance and the normative force of WL should come from the way the workplace is managed.

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References


