



Context, Power and Perspective:
The Challenges to Improving Attainment at Work
Network/TLRP/SKOPE workshop held at University College Northampton,
8-10th November 2001.

The members of the TLRP Research Network 'Improving incentives to learning in the workplace' organised an international workshop to bring together leading national and international experts to exchange ideas on how to meet the challenges of studying the workplace as a site of learning.

Lessons learned from the workshop

In the workplace, power relations and the contested nature of the employment relationship are central to understanding learning. Learning is embedded in the social context and in on-going social practice. This means that workplace learning must be discussed 'at least partially unencumbered from assumptions based on practices in educational institutions' (Billett, 2001:2). The absence of qualified teachers and a formal curriculum does not mean that learning does not take place. Learning experiences can be highly structured because they are concerned with continuity in the norms and practices of the workgroup.

The conceptualisation work-based learning and vocational knowledge was the subject of a lively debate. This extended to the consideration of formal, informal and tacit forms of learning. The standard paradigm of learning derived from teaching in educational institutions does not capture the different forms of workplace learning. Much of this is difficult to separate from practice and is not conceptualised as 'learning' but 'doing'. Models of assessing learner attainment based on practices in educational establishments only capture forms of learning which approximate to the standard paradigm of learning. Their application to workplace learning will distort understanding by focussing on what is measurable. Proxies, such as improved company performance, are difficult to link to specific training interventions, since many other factors may effect business performance. Nevertheless there is considerable pressure on trainers and training providers to sell and promote their interventions on this basis despite the difficulties of demonstrating causality.

National vocational education and training systems take their characteristics from the underlying relationship between the state, capital and labour. Workplace learning only becomes an issue under certain social conditions. This relates to the state's capacity to support workplace learning and work modernisation, on the one hand, and the extent to which organised interest groups are engaged in the regulation and certification of vocational knowledge, on the other. The question of who defines vocational knowledge e.g. colleges, employers, the social partners varies from one country to another and also effects the extent to which there is an interest in certifying it.

The idea that workplace learning is socially situated is widely accepted. Two currently dominant theoretical perspectives - communities of practice and activity theory - were critically debated. Questions were raised about the boundaries of communities of practice and activity systems and the extent to which novices also bring expertise to the workplace. Theories of learning at work need to reflect the contested nature of the employment relationship and the wider social and economic context in which learning takes place. Fuller and Unwin emphasised the need to locate employees' learning in the company learning culture, the pattern of skill distribution within the organisation, individual biographies and qualification pathways. They developed the metaphor of individual and organisational learning territories as a means of conceptualising the expansive and restrictive features of the learning experience, which include tacit knowledge and skills as well as codified knowledge and qualifications.

There is a distinction to be made between the formal qualifications and the skills (explicit and tacit) of the worker and the demands of the job. The Skills Survey findings demonstrate that although the qualifications of the workforce have been increasing, the demand from employers has not been commensurate. The transfer of skills and knowledge from one context to another is of key importance and successful transfer involves learning itself. This is true of codified as well as tacit forms of knowledge. Recognition that learning transfer is not straightforward raises questions about the extent to which work-related knowledge can be taught in educational settings and the role of vested interests of educational and training institutions in supporting particular types of policy intervention.

The nature of work organisation and the social relations of the workplace shape the learning opportunities afforded to individuals and workgroups. In Italian small firms, workers are highly skilled through knowledge developed through practice even though they have few formal educational qualifications. The quality of the product and the production process are crucial in shaping the quality of the learning experience. The company's capacity to design products autonomously, to realise a finished product and to sell under its own trademark are significant variables. The history and personal involvement of the owner is especially important in small firms. Not all developments in work modernisation support increased motivation for learning, but may fragment work and reduce learning opportunities. High performance work systems which are supposed to require higher levels of employee skill are based on changing organisational cultures and the division of labour – rather than training interventions. Activities such as team-working and the enhancement of work roles may be developmental. There is a need to understand the nature of the workplace as a learning environment and the ways in which it can be enhanced as a prior condition to examining attainment.

Implications for further research aimed at raising attainment in the workplace and possible future research under Phase Three of the TLRP

The final session focussed on emerging themes and future priorities for research. There are choices to be made between a focus on individuals and questions of individual motivation and attainment and one which engages with systemic analysis, explores different levels of incentive structures and structural problems. The former focuses on the supply side of the labour market, the latter on the demand side. A further distinction needs to be made between the policy agenda and priorities of

different government agencies which are often concerned with specific interventions (such as the DfES, the LSC, the DTI and the QCA). This must be set against the needs of real organisations (public, private and voluntary sector) where these policy interventions may be marginal to their Human Resource strategies. Indeed, employees' learning needs will be lower order issues compared to business strategy and economic survival. As a result, training and development strategies need to be located in the business strategy of the organisation; the organisational structure; people management practices; the wider employment relationship; and the immediate labour process.

The question of more effective learning needs to be problematised: learning of what, by whom and for what? There are questions about 'who decides?' and the role of learners' voices in decision-making processes. Learning is not an unconditional good in the highly contested context of the workplace and it is extremely difficult to separate it from other issues of appraisal, management and reward. Moreover, qualifications are highly complex. They are used for a wide variety of purposes: control of performance, screening and to provide market signals.

Research proposals will need to acknowledge a number of common threads which ran through the discussions. These included:

- the significance of power relations in the workplace;
- business strategy rather than learning as the driver of decision-making;
- the relationship between the skills and knowledge of the workforce and the demands of the employer/work process;
- the intersection between individual trajectories and the social context of the workplace;
- the use of skills in the labour process and its impact on learning;
- assessment and accreditation: their usage and meaning in the workplace context;
- the effects on capacity to train and provide a supportive learning environment of organisational restructuring and sub-contracting processes.
- the need to explore differences between leading edge and backwoods employers
- the need to bring together qualitative and quantitative analysis;
- the need for integrated, multi-level analysis (individuals, workgroups, firms, communities, sectors, society and the economy).
- the need to find theoretical connections between disciplines.

Specific research topics identified were:

- Inequality: workers who are in restrictive learning environments.
- Learner voices.
- Trainers: their own training and development.
- The learning theories held by trainers and in the training literature.
- Managers as learners and as managers of learning.
- The transfer of best practice.
- An exploration of skill, knowledge, behaviour and attitudes in the workplace.
- The role of qualifications in the workplace.
- Winners and losers in workplace learning: training as a positional good.
- The public VET infrastructure and the policy-making process.

The Programme and individual projects should be encouraged to involve a range of different users in the design, development and dissemination of research. These

include: the Department for Education and Skills; the Department of Trade and Industry; the Treasury; the Performance and Innovation Unit of the Cabinet Office; the Learning and Skills Council; Local Learning and Skills Councils; the Learning and Skills Development Agency; their Scottish and Welsh equivalents; employers and their representative organisations; the TUC and individual trade unions; teachers; trainers and private training providers. It will be particularly important for projects funded under Phase Three to involve new intermediate level institutions which are currently in formation, such as the Sector Skills Councils, including those with 'Trailblazer' status. One mechanism for bringing together researchers and practitioners to discuss the implications of research findings would be to provide funding to reconstitute the Warwick VET Forum, which was funded by the Training Agency (formerly the Manpower Services Commission) between 1988 and 1993. This regularly brought together researchers in different academic disciplines, practitioners and policy-makers at termly workshops attracting over one hundred participants and was significant in establishing VET as a field of research.

Helen Rainbird, University College Northampton, with acknowledgements to Ewart Keep, University of Warwick, and Stephen Billett, Griffith University, Australia, who acted as discussants in the final session.

For further details of the programme see attachment and for information about the Research Network see: <http://www.northampton.ac.uk/nct/esrc-resnet/>