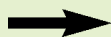


Improving Learning in the Workplace

The primary objective of workplaces is to produce goods and services, but they are also important locations for learning. This briefing comes from an interdisciplinary network of research projects which investigated a diverse range of contemporary organisations. The findings show that complex interactions between government policy, workplace regulation and individual worker dispositions contribute to the uneven quality of learning environments and learning opportunities. To improve learning at work it is important to understand such interactions.

Workplaces can be more expansive or more restrictive as learning environments. Richer learning is found where the environment is more expansive.



The expansive - restrictive framework provides a new way to analyse and assess the quality of learning environments, and to improve learning.

Regulatory frameworks and government policy have significant direct and indirect impacts on opportunities for workplace learning.



Improving workplace learning often entails making changes to regulatory frameworks. In particular, issues of worker status and unequal access to learning have to be addressed.

The dispositions and tacit skills of workers influence the working environment and the ways in which workers react to and interact with that environment.



'One size fits all' approaches to learning, imposed by management (or government) can meet problems, as workers respond in different ways. There may be resistance or strategic compliance rather than enthusiasm.

These three dimensions are inter-related. None of them can be properly understood without the others, i.e. approaches to improving learning at work need to address these complex interrelationships. The expansive - restrictive framework is one possible tool for doing that.

The research

A network of five projects explored the contemporary workplace as a site for learning, looking for ways in which learning and incentives for learning could be improved. The network linked five universities drawing on disciplines including education, industrial relations and political economy. The projects are:

1. Regulatory structures and access to learning: case studies in social care and cleaning services.
2. Recognition of tacit skills and knowledge in work re-entry.
3. The workplace as a site for learning for mature workers and new entrants: opportunities and barriers in small and medium-sized enterprises (steel industry).
4. An exploration of the nature of apprenticeship in an advanced economy (in the Teaching Company Scheme and care for carers).
5. The school as a site for work-based learning (secondary school teachers).

Analysis across the five projects identified three major themes. These concern:

- expansive and restrictive learning environments,
- regulatory and state interventions,
- the disposition of individual learners

Expansive and restrictive learning environments

Project 3 initially developed the expansive - restrictive framework as an analytical tool to help make sense of the different approaches to workforce development. In particular, patterns of apprenticeship were observed at steel industry case study sites. The project found that a workplace with an expansive learning environment offered greater opportunities to learn than restrictive ones, and made it more likely that those opportunities would be utilised. The framework, shown on this page, was developed for more general applicability.

It proved to be applicable, in slightly modified forms, to all projects in the Network. It has facilitated insights into aspects of the organisation of work and learning, organisational culture and institutional factors which impinge on the lived reality of learning for a wide range of both new and experienced employees. For apprentices at the most expansive of project three's sites, learning occurred through the variety of work, through challenges in the job, and through access to a range of different departments, which included opportunities to 'boundary cross' into different jobs or work settings. Employees were also encouraged

to participate in off-the-job as well as on-the-job learning and in collaborative as well as individual learning. In the expansive environment, learning was taken seriously by both managers and employees at all levels. A learning culture was evident in normal working practices but extended to a more formalised recognition of learning, for example, through the development of a workplace learning curriculum. There was a history and culture of employee development in the firm.

Regulation and State Intervention

Regulatory frameworks affect the expansiveness of learning environments and impact significantly upon workers' ability to access learning. Regulation refers to the establishment of rules governing the employment relationship. This may occur

through legislation, collective bargaining, management imposition or through workplace custom and practice. Regulation can affect learning directly and indirectly. State intervention in management practice is more common in the public sector, where the state is effectively the employer, than in the private sector. The care sector is unusual in that there are now statutory requirements for the operation of care homes and for the qualifications of care workers wherever they are employed. This has consequences in the assessment of their competence through NVQs but does not automatically involve training. Teachers are also strongly influenced by national policy which may affect their learning directly through imposed initiatives such as the one to improve computer use, or indirectly when for example when they have to learn to implement curriculum changes. The steel industry firms in project 3 were all operating the national 'Modern Apprenticeship' scheme, though the interpretations of it were varied and more or

Approaches to Workforce Development	
EXPANSIVE	RESTRICTIVE
Participation in range of settings inside and outside the workplace	Participation restricted to one or two settings
Primary work setting has shared 'participative memory': cultural inheritance of workforce development	Primary work setting has little or no 'participative memory': no or little tradition of apprenticeship
Access to learning fostered by cross-company experiences and boundary crossing	Narrowness: access to learning restricted in terms of tasks, knowledge, location
Access to range of qualifications including knowledge-based VQ	Little or no access to qualifications
Planned time off-the-job for knowledge-based courses, and reflection	Virtually all-on-job: limited opportunities for reflection
Gradual transition to full, rounded participation (for apprentices/new workers)	Fast transition from novice/trainee to productive worker - as quick as possible
Vision of workplace learning: progression for career	Vision of workplace learning: static for job
Organisational recognition of, & support for employees as learners	employees only seen as productive workers
Workplace learning aligned with broader organisational goals leading to development of individual and organisational capability	Workplace learning viewed as ad hoc, reactive episodes used to tailor individual capability to organisational need
Workplace 'curriculum' highly developed - accessible to all employees	Little understanding of workplace 'curriculum'
Widely distributed skills	Polarised distribution of skills
Knowledge & skills of whole workforce developed & valued	Knowledge, skills of key workers /groups developed & valued
Managers as facilitators of workforce & individual development	Managers with little understanding of workforce & individual development
Multi-dimensional view of expertise	Uni-dimensional top-down view of expertise

less effective in providing significant learning or simply producing employees competent in limited aspects of their work.

One of the characteristics of training and development in the UK is that it is relatively unregulated compared to other European countries. The British government has put most of the responsibility of implementing training and development onto individual firms. There is funding available for initial training, and some resources made available through trades unions, but no national structure of employee entitlement. Manual and routine workers, and part-timers in particular, have least access to training and workplace learning. Some employees feel their jobs are changing in ways which de-skill them or undermine their motivation to learn. Shift work patterns and hours of work affect the ability of staff to attend courses and achieve progression. Night and rotating shifts can be a particular problem. Part-timers may have family commitments or more than one job. Work intensification and staff shortages may make paid release from work difficult for all workers. Job expansion brings changes and challenges which can promote workplace learning in some circumstances, but which can also result in stress and demotivation leading to cynicism and strategic compliance.

Dispositions of individual workers

We identified four overlapping and inter-linked ways in which individual biography is relevant to learning at work.

1. Workers/learners bring prior knowledge, understanding and skills with them, which can contribute to their future work and learning.

This involves important tacit dimensions. All workers bring to work experiences, abilities and attitudes which affect the ways in which they can work and learn. For example, people with breaks in paid employment have personal competencies which can be relevant to future work. These competencies may be unrecognised either by employers or workers themselves, but are most likely to emerge in expansive environments where development is encouraged.

2. Individuals' dispositions towards work, career and learning influence the ways in which they understand and take advantage of opportunities for learning at work.

For example, two teachers in the same school reacted very differently to the introduction of a performance management scheme. One saw it as an imposed instrument of management control and complied minimally. The second saw it as an opportunity to plan his own progress and access appropriate courses.

Major implications

In the current political, economic and social context, there is an understandable tendency to see workplace learning as the controlled acquisition of predetermined skills, knowledge and working practices. Someone (for example a manager, or government policy maker) decides what learning should be done, how the success of such learning can be measured, and how it will be developed. In essence, this approach sees learning as primarily about the individual's acquisition of absent skills. These are attained primarily through specific training or development events, with prespecified learning outcomes, which are often measured and assessed on completion. Thus, many employers want to identify clearly costed direct benefits from any investment in learning, as does the government. Some trade unions have encouraged learning representatives to meet government targets by facilitating workers' access to courses and learning packages, for example through Learn Direct.

Our research suggests that this approach is largely misguided. Firstly, employers and others have much to gain from recognising, using and further expanding the skills that workers already possess, rather than taking a predominantly deficit view. Where these skills are tacit, recognition of these skills by others and their positive deployment in challenging work tasks can boost the confidence and learning potential of workers at all levels. Secondly, though formal training and instruction can be very important, and should not be neglected, most workplace learning occurs through everyday working practices. Thirdly, formalised approaches implicitly assume a predictability about the impact of pedagogical interventions, across all relevant workers, in any targeted context. Our analysis shows that, at best, such approaches can only be partial in their positive impact, and that, at worst, unintended side-effects will result in

3. The values and dispositions of individual workers contribute to the construction and reconstruction of workplace community cultures and practices which influence learning.

In combination with other factors, individual workers can affect the nature of the working environment, for themselves and for others who work with them. This can make a difference to opportunities to learn and to workers' reactions to those opportunities.

4. Working in and belonging to a workplace community contributes to the development of worker/learner identity.

Joining a workplace can involve becoming part of an established and only slowly changing culture. This can be a positive or negative experience, as what an individual wants does not always coincide with what

significant impacts that actually undermine the original intentions.

Here, we argue for a different approach. To improve workplace learning entails enhancing opportunities to learn in the workplace. This may involve constructing more expansive learning environments for workers, based upon a detailed assessment of what workers would want, would respond positively to, or need, in a particular setting. It could involve changes to normal working practices, and also to wider structural and regulatory factors such as the division of labour, pay, promotion and status recognition. Within an expansive approach, the positions and dispositions of workers should be taken seriously, for example by providing some of the learning opportunities which they value, rather than those which managers assume they either need or should want. This in turn requires attention to working cultures and practices, as well as, in part, to individual differences and preferences. This means that much planning and activity should be responsive to the micro-conditions of specific working groups or contexts, as well as more macro influences. To be successful, it will need to pay attention to power differentials and workplace inequalities, as well as individual wants or needs. In short, the approach should be to encourage and facilitate learning through work, not directly to impose it. Our research indicates that top-down approaches will only have a partial impact, for any changes introduced will affect different workers in different ways, and will result in differing responses from them. However, this partiality is true of all other approaches to workplace learning also. Indeed, if there is one safe conclusion to be drawn from this work, it is that efforts to improve workplace learning will always impact unevenly, across workplaces and individual workers. We need to accept that as a cultural reality; it is not a counsel of despair.

either the existing group of workers or the managers want. Learning is more likely to be enhanced by an expansive community.

The dispositions and actions of workers contribute to the extent to which a workplace learning environment is expansive or restrictive. A more expansive environment is found where workers value their own learning, support the learning of their fellow workers, and where their (often tacit) skills are recognised and utilised by the employer. The dispositions and actions of workers influence their responses to opportunities to learn. Those dispositions are influenced by the worker's past life history, their current working environment, and the effects of work regulation and government initiatives.

Further information

Further information on the Network and its five projects will be found on the project website. It will include several articles and conference papers plus additional information about publications.

Publications for practitioners:

- *The Learning Workplace* (2003) (A pamphlet for practitioners and policy makers), University College Northampton.
- Unwin, L. & Fuller, A. (2003) *Expanding Learning in the Workplace. Making more of Individual and Organisational Potential*. Leicester, National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education.
- Hodkinson, H. and Hodkinson, P. *Briefing paper no.1) Three Dimensions of Teacher Learning* (2001); *no.2) Supporting Effective Secondary School Teachers' Learning* (2002), University of Leeds Lifelong Learning Institute.
- Evans, K. & Kersh, N. *Methods and instruments for self-evaluation of tacit forms of personal competences*, will be published as part of a 'tool box' for European practitioners in 2004, available from Institute of Education, University of London.

Books:

Rainbird, H., Fuller, A., and Munro, A. (Eds.) *Workplace Learning In Context*. Routledge 2004.

A TLRP Gateway book in the *Improving Learning* series is in preparation, proposed title: 'Improving Workplace Learning', to be published by RoutledgeFalmer.

There are a number of academic papers published by individual projects, and across the network. These are listed on the website.

Refereed Publications:

A special edition of the *International Journal of Training and Development* on workplace learning, edited by Peter Senker and Jeff Hyman, contains papers from projects 2, 3 and 5.

Network Website: <http://www.tlrp.org/project sites/IILW/index.htm>

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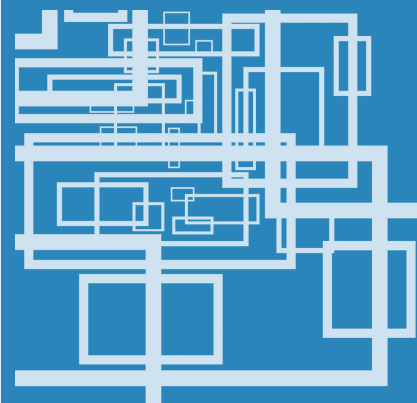
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The warrant

Each project utilised qualitative case studies. Over the network as a whole, during a 3-year period, interviews were conducted with 230 learners/employees of whom 55 were longitudinally tracked. A total of 170 questionnaires and 281 learning logs were completed by research participants. Ten colleges/training providers and 41 workplace sites were researched, including private and public sector organisations. Observations were carried out during more than 250 days of site visits and interviews were conducted with 116 key informants (tutors, trainers, managers, employers, officers and representatives of trade union and employer organisations, officials of sectoral training bodies). Each project produced its own results, and explored and tested findings from the others. As a result, three overlapping themes emerged, as described in this Research Briefing.

Where practicable, the authenticity of findings has been cross-checked with practitioners, both in the field and on our advisory group. Preliminary findings from each project have been tested out and further refined in the others, to validate their generalisability. Findings have been exposed and refined through 'live peer review', by practitioners and top academics in the workplace learning field, at national and international conferences, seminars and specially arranged workshops.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP is the largest education research programme in the UK, and benefits from research teams and funding contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Projects began in 2000 and will continue with dissemination and impact work extending through 2008/9.

Learning: TLRP's overarching aim is to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts within the UK.

Outcomes: TLRP studies a broad range of learning outcomes. These include both the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

Lifecourse: TLRP supports research projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning.

Enrichment: TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. The Programme promotes research across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports various forms of national and international co-operation and comparison.

Expertise: TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research-informed policy and practice.

Improvement: TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and collaborates with users to transform this into effective policy and practice in the UK.

TLRP is managed by the Economic and Social Research Council research mission is to advance knowledge and to promote its use to enhance the quality of life, develop policy and practice and strengthen economic competitiveness. ESRC is guided by principles of quality, relevance and independence.

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