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ARE TRAINING SYSTEMS EXPECTING TOO MUCH FROM WORKPLACES?

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Are Training Systems Expecting Too Much From Workplaces?

Around the world, vocational education and training systems have been re-examining their relationship with industry and a common thread in their response has been to place a greater reliance on training that occurs wholly in the workplace (eg Ministry of Education Skills and Training, 1995).

Of course, the reliance of formal training systems on workplace is not new. Many countries have a long history of involvement with apprenticeship systems in which considerable proportions — if not the whole — of the training occurs in the workplace. However, the recent developments have occurred at the same time as traditional apprenticeships are in decline. It represents a shift in which many different policy discourses converge with the result that the state and the society now rely heavily on the capacity of workplaces to provide appropriate quality training.

However, there have been warnings that, however desirable, a strong reliance on workplace training may be problematic (De Vries & Warmerdam, 1992).

This paper will draw primarily on Australian research that has been looking at this issue over the past decade. While the research highlights the benefits that can arise from a focus on formal learning in the workplace, it raises questions about the extent to which a society can, or should, rely on workplaces as primary providers of formally recognised learning.

In Australia, policy for over a decade has been structured around the concept of “an industry-led system” (Australian National Training Authority, 1998). While this concept has never been unambiguously defined, two key components appear to be involved — the involvement of “industry” at the system level and the direct involvement of workplaces in delivering qualifications.

Workplace involvement at the system level

Typically, in Australia, workplaces are not themselves directly involved in policy or related developments at the system level. However, the whole policy framework is predicated on the assumption of their awareness and active involvement. It is an interesting question as to why this should be the case and the typical explanation of this level of involvement is summed up in this quotation from the early 1990s that justified the introduction of competency-based training (CBT):

... often what was taught depended on the teacher - what the teacher thought they should know, or even what the teacher liked to teach.

(Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 1993, p.9)

In short, industry took the view that education and training systems had failed and that they now needed to be more directly involved. However, the level of dissatisfaction implied by this statement sits oddly against the findings of surveys of employers conducted over a number of years (eg National Centre for Vocational Education and Training Research, 1999) consistently find overall employer satisfaction with the system exceeding 80%.

Involvement in policy development

Despite this, the Australian system is directed by an organisation all of whose Board members are drawn from industry and the key planning documents for the system — National Industry Training Plans — are developed by industry bodies known as National Industry Training Advisory Bodies (ITABs).

However, membership of these bodies is heavily dominated by organisations that represent large enterprises and/or whose primary role is the representation of employers on industrial matters. Small employers have very little involvement at this level although they represent a significant proportion of all employment.

Involvement in curriculum development

It is in the more direct areas of system-level direction, however, that this question of balance and representation becomes most significant.

“Training Packages” form a central plank of the Australian system. They are collections of industry competency standards packaged so as to define the range of nationally recognised qualifications that may be offered (Australian National Training Authority, 1999). These documents are produced (in the main) by the national ITABs, discussed above. They represent the consensus view of industry as to the standards that are required “for competent performance in the workplace”. Typically these Packages take 18 months to 2 years to develop and the process involves both research and consultation with the industry.

Research concerning the introduction of Training Packages (Moy & Hawke, 1997), found that workplaces—the principal clients for whom the Training Packages had been developed—had very low levels of awareness and were only rarely involved in the development process. Indeed even industry organisations at state or national level commonly reported that they had not even seen any of the material in Training Packages.

Given the many thousands of individual workplaces in any given industry, this may not be altogether surprising, however, this raises important questions about the representativeness of the final outcome.

Moy (2000), for example, reports that both the content and assessment procedures specified in many Training Packages were inappropriate for many small/medium size businesses. She identified that the operational processes being assumed were ones that typically did not apply to smaller organisations. This interpretation is supported by a small business owner who was recognised by the Australian National Training Authority for his exemplary training practices (Robert-Thomson, 2001). The Tasmanian tulip farmer not only noted that the final Packages were inappropriate to large sectors of the industry, but observed that the development process used, ensured that many industry segments went unconsulted.

Workplace involvement in delivering qualifications

Research conducted for a major government training agency (Hawke, Mawer, Connole, & Solomon, 1998) identified the great diversity of ways in which individual enterprises engaged with the formal education and training system.

While all of the workplaces in the study were committed to providing a quality outcome for their trainees, what that meant to them varied widely. For many, their interest lay solely in developing the specific skills required within their own organisation. In some industry sectors where a tradition of apprenticeship existed, they also saw themselves as having a moral commitment to preserving the standards of the “trade” but this did not always translate into their having a financial commitment to doing so.

In areas, however, where the tradition of apprenticeship did not exist, there was little evidence of a sense of public responsibility to provide generic skills transferable beyond the workplace or skills where they were not used within the firm. The existence of public funding to support the program was often their only reason for involvement.

This sort of outcome is not unique to this study. The Schofield and Marshman studies (Marshman, 1998; Schofield, 1999a, 1999b) found that many firms engaged in the process of offering recognised qualifications only to the degree necessary to satisfy their own immediate needs. This is problematic in a system which aims for longer-term outcomes in the broader interest in the community as a whole. Indeed, Schofield’s work has documented cases where qualifications were being issued without any of the basic requirements of the system being satisfied.

Workplaces as learning environments

The greatest constraint on the involvement of enterprises within the formal system arises from the inherent nature of enterprises themselves. In one program that was being operated under the auspice of a national industry body (Hawke et al., 1998), a review of the program led the organisation to become aware, for the first time, of the poor quality of the facilities in many of the member firms who were participating. It learnt that bad—and even dangerous—practices were being demonstrated to trainees as part of their learning. These were, however, the normal practices in these firms!

That same study found that many of the workplaces involved had become highly specialised in either the processes they utilised or the products or services they provided. The consequence was that, in a number of cases, the employers were unable to provide training in many of the areas required. Moreover, they were unwilling to participate in job rotation arrangements because of the loss of productivity they would experience.

The firms and industry organisations in the Hawke et al study (1998) took a strong position that training programs needed to reflect their needs rather than enterprises adapting their own operational arrangements to fit the demands of training programs. Many were prepared to make some adjustments but there were significant limits on how far they were prepared to go. This manifested itself in a number of ways. Some organisations indicated that they were reconsidering their involvement in these nationally recognised qualifications because the constraints were greater than they could accept. Others were prepared to live within the constraints for a while at least. Others dealt with the limitations by ignoring them.

There is a clear body of literature which suggests that while workplaces are the site of considerable learning they are not, typically, sites in which much structured training occurs (e.g. Field, 1998, and references cited there). (The extent to which this is true varies greatly across organisations by size and by industry). Most of this learning is unstructured and unplanned (Hendry, Arthur, & Jones, 1995; Poell, Van der Krogt, & Wildemeersch, 1999).

Marsick & Watkins (, 1990), for example, note that up to 83% of workplace learning typically occurs in informal or incidental ways. Moreover much of it is highly context-specific and there are grounds for questioning the degree to which it transfers to other contexts.

Much of the learning occurs through mechanisms which don't fit well into the language or structures of vocational education and training—eg it often occurs at the organisational not the individual level, it often arises from inter-organisational networking, it occurs on an “as-needed” basis (Field, 1998).

The central issue appears to be that enterprises exist primarily for purposes other than providing training. Consequently, many workplaces do not have any interest or commitment to the development of generic or other broadly-based skills, most enterprises have few or no employees skilled (or trained) to carry out training or assessment, many workplaces do not operate to “industry standards” making them unsuitable as quality training sites. Indeed some consistently adopt dangerous or illegal methods.

Firms, typically, do not view training as their “core business”. They are prepared to be involved where it does not conflict with their major objectives and, in many cases, can only be swayed from this to a degree by significant financial incentives. In addition, the enormous diversity of needs, organisational structures and operating styles of workplaces make it difficult for them to comfortably conform to system-level requirements.

Workplaces can provide extensive opportunities to apply and practice skills or knowledge learnt earlier. They are less adaptable to developing conceptual understanding or encouraging the acquisition of knowledge. Moreover, the development of skill has been shown to clearly benefit from a systematic transition from more specific to more generalised and abstract learning contexts. This is enhanced where opportunities to reflect and to conceptualise relationships and principles are provided (Stevenson, 1994). However, real workplaces do not

always provide such structures to the learning or experience they provide to their employees. Where they have done so, the benefits are clearly seen.

Small businesses

A critical test of the capacity of workplaces to provide for significant input into the formal vocational education system is the capacity of small and medium-sized enterprises to make such a contribution. In developed countries, small/medium-sized enterprises make up 80%-90% of all businesses. While they typically provide a rather smaller proportion of total employment, nonetheless their overall role within industry is significant.

Field's studies of small business have looked at the nature of learning in such enterprises (Field, 1998). He notes that, for many small enterprises, the amount of learning that employees require is quite limited for a range of reasons. For example, the nature of the firm's work may be quite static—little change occurs — and so little new learning is involved. In other cases, the firms introduce new ideas by employing staff who have worked in other contexts and they apply that new knowledge directly. It may diffuse to other employees, but this is not essential for the firm

For other firms, however, new learning is always required. But even here, training may not be the answer. Sales representatives and accountants represent significant sources of new knowledge and new techniques for many small firms. The learning that occurs is informal, arises out of normal on-going activities and is specific to an immediate need. For yet others, formal, structured training provides an effective and efficient means of introducing new knowledge and skills.

It is well-known that small/medium size enterprises are much less involved in providing structured training than are larger workplaces and Field's work goes some way towards explaining why this is the case. However, the trend amongst organisations is to downsize and

to adopt organisational structures which resemble a network of interconnected, semi-autonomous small organisations. Thus the trend may be towards small business models of learning, rather than towards greater workplace involvement.

The changing face of workplaces

However all of the limitations of workplaces discussed above relate primarily to workplaces as they have operated until recent times. A more profound and, potentially long-lasting, issue arises from the changes which are occurring to 'work'.

There is a growing international literature on the changing needs and demands of the workplace and, in a recent major research study (Buchanan et al., 2001), the thinking and experiences of North America, Europe and Australia were synthesised and their implications for vocational education and training systems identified.

That study noted that a consistent pattern of change could be discerned in which workplaces:

- Are directly employing fewer full-time, ongoing workers and are using more casual and contract workers and/or they are outsourcing major functions.
- Are intensifying the amount and breadth of work that is carried out by employees.
- Are increasingly homogenous in the workers they do employ, with enterprises tending to specialise at either the high-skill or, more commonly, the low-skill end of the spectrum.

Each of these has implications for the ways in which workplaces can be effectively involved in the operation of an education and training system. For example, Buchanan et al (2001) found that a significant consequence of the decreasing share of the labourforce held by full-time, ongoing workers was that employers are showing signs of taking the view that learning is the worker's responsibility. These employers are saying that their best strategy is

to “buy” the skills they need rather than to develop new skills in the workers they currently employ. While, clearly, other employers are taking a different position, if this view were to become common, its implications for a vocational education and training system built around workplace learning would be profound.

Conclusion

There are reasons to believe that many of these matters reflect the history and culture of existing workplaces rather than reflecting “what might be”. Indeed many enterprises are experimenting with structural and cultural changes which might provide greater support for learning (Learmonth, 1993). To date, however, the results have been mixed and most of these experiments have been confined to large, service sector organisations.

So, what we can conclude about the role of workplaces within formal systems of education and training?

Firstly the evidence indicates clearly that we are operating in a domain in which complexity and variability is the dominant feature. It is not the simple issue that appears to be assumed by most current policy processes.

Workplaces vary greatly on a range of features that are important when we need to consider what role — if any — they should play in the development and delivery of formal programs of training. Among these key features are the following:

- the extent to which learning is valued and rewarded within the enterprise
- the role of knowledge in setting the competitive climate for the enterprise
- the size of the enterprise or worksite
- the range of products, processes or services provided by the workplace
- the capacity and willingness of the workplace to cooperate with related organisations

Secondly, many workplaces are not clear about what role they want to play in the delivery of nationally recognised qualifications and are equally unclear about what they can properly

expect to obtain from any involvement. Typically, enterprises have become involved through what are, in essence, marketing campaigns. The reality they subsequently experience has been very different and their disappointment has fuelled a cynicism and uncertainty that will have long-term consequences.

Finally, policy-makers are unclear about what they want workplaces to do. Throughout the last ten years, descriptions of the role of workplaces within the overall vocational education and training system have varied widely. Their role has shifted from providing advice and direction, to leadership, to provision of workplace experience, to full responsibility for provision, to quality assurance.

We've still no clear understanding about how learning occurs in workplaces or what workplaces might, in time, be capable of providing. We need to more clearly understand the nature of the core business of workplaces before we — as someone so aptly put it at a recent conference — create another “policy pudding.”

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