

Connecting workplace learning and VET to lifelong learning

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Introduction

The recognition that workplaces are learning environments has become widespread in both research and policy circles, but workplace learning is often absent from debates about lifelong learning. Similarly, vocational education and training (VET) is also referred to as a separate phenomenon, and, curiously, can even become separated from debates about workplace learning. In the United Kingdom (UK) this separation is partly a result of the long-standing distinction between 'education' and 'training', between the 'vocational' and the 'professional', and the continued influence of the academic-vocational divide. It also tends to place young people (teenagers) in separate boxes to adults. All too often, VET is reduced to an umbrella phrase for government-funded training schemes.

The separation has also been fuelled by the way workplace, VET and lifelong learning are positioned within and treated by the research community. Lifelong learning is often used as a catch-all term for the learning that adults do in their spare time away from work and, in that sense, has replaced the term 'adult education'. To that extent, in our consideration of how the concept of lifelong learning (and its more recent alternative of life-wide learning) will play out in the years to 2025, we have to ask to what extent it is still meaningful since it first came to prominence more than 30 years ago.

In the past ten or so years, however, the walls of the disciplinary silos have been breached to some extent triggering a growth of inter-disciplinary projects bringing

together researchers in the fields of education, labour process, sociology of work, human resources, and management (see Evans et al, 2006; Rainbird et al, 2004). The importance of exploring learning from the perspective of the lifecourse has also helped to foster greater inter-disciplinary co-operation (see *inter alia* Biesta and Tedder, 2007; Field and Malcolm, 2006).

There are a number of reasons why a greater connectivity between workplace learning, VET and lifelong learning would be desirable when looking ahead to 2025. First, work continues to form a major part of people's lives and, therefore, for their learning. Second, the dynamic nature of the production of goods and provision of services constantly challenges the characteristics and shelf-life of skills and vocational knowledge (see *inter alia* Guile, 2003; Foray and Lundvall, 1996; Florida, 1995). In addition, the impact of globalization is, according to Brown et al (2008, p7) transforming the way companies "think about the global supply of talent". Third, the increasing tendency for some people to fuse the work and non-work parts and spaces of their lives (see Felstead's paper for this review; also Field, 2000) raises questions about the extent to which learning at, through, and for work becomes embedded within lifelong learning rather than separated from it. Fourth, and perhaps of most concern, the conceptual and cultural separation of workplace learning, VET and lifelong learning, as reflected in everyday discourse about education and training, is also mirrored in the UK's, and particularly England's institutional and policy architecture. This has its roots in age-old prejudices about the privileging of those who work with the head over those who work with the hand, a prejudice that has found new voice through the promotion of the 'knowledge economy' and the 'knowledge worker'.

This paper discusses the relationship between workplace learning, VET and lifelong learning and argues that greater connectivity is both necessary and also increasingly likely to occur through the sheer force of demand for more innovative ideas to solve the impending global problems of climate change, economic sustainability, and social cohesion. The argument for greater connectivity does not, however, mean that the parts that are being connected should remain as they are – far from it. The opportunity to look to the future should encourage a fundamental examination of the extent to which the existing conceptions of and structures for workplace learning, VET and lifelong learning are adequate and how they might be evolved to meet new challenges.

The paper is divided into three further sections. The first two review the key issues highlighted by researchers that need to be tackled if workplace learning, VET and lifelong learning are to be better connected and to evolve and improve. The final section offers some brief conclusions.

Keywords: vocational education, training, learning environments, lifelong learning, adult education, spare time

Workplace Learning

In order to understand how workplace learning occurs, it must be recognized that it arises from, and is embedded within, everyday workplace activity and the technical and social relations of production (Felstead et al, 2009; Hoyrup and Elkjaer, 2006; Billett, 2001). It is a phenomenon that takes many forms, from traditional structured training away from the site of production, supervised training in the workplace itself, and the everyday collegial sharing of knowledge and skills as tasks are performed. It involves the use of a wide range of pedagogical methods and most of this learning will not involve someone designated as having a training role (eg trainer, tutor, mentor, coach, supervisor, manager, etc). The potential for the use of e-learning tools is increasing,

particularly due to the ubiquity of technological and computerized devices in workplaces. It is estimated that three-quarters of employees in the UK, across a wide range of occupations, now use automated or computerised equipment (Felstead et al, 2007a). Access to the internet has also increased most amongst employed people, from 68% in 2003 to 81% in 2007 (Dutton and Helsper, 2007).

The social nature of learning in the workplace is also reflected in surveys that show how employees, of all grades and job type, regard learning through 'everyday' productive activity at work as the most helpful for doing the job (Felstead et al., 2005). The embedded nature of learning within work activity does, however, create considerable problems for researchers and policymakers as they search for credible ways to measure and define the phenomenon. Measuring 'training' (in the form of structured events away from the immediate work station) is regarded, therefore, as a much more credible way to evaluate the nature and impact of learning at work. This, however, creates its own problems. Tamkin et al (2002) argue that current techniques for evaluating training are inadequate, and we know that training can be regarded as both a 'reward' and a 'punishment' by workers – a day out at a hotel with a nice lunch falls into the reward category, whilst being told you have to attend a training event because you are deficient in some way can be seen as a punishment. In either case, it can be very difficult to measure the amount of meaningful new learning acquired and the extent to which the participant will then transfer that learning to their work situation, as opposed to the simple measure of attendance.

Research tells us that access to opportunities for formalized training at or away from work varies by size of organisation, sector, and occupation, and by personal characteristics such as gender, job status, and prior educational attainment. Around 50% of companies with fewer than five employees provide training for staff, compared with nine out of ten employers with 25 or more employees. The higher your status, the more likely you are to gain access to both training and to be given time off for study (Felstead et al, 2007a). In its review, the SSDA (2007) also found that:

- Professionals and associate professionals and those with more qualifications receive more training
- Women in full-time jobs are more likely to receive training than their male colleagues, though the reverse was true for women in part-time jobs
- Levels of training vary dramatically between sectors
- Age matters – more training is provided to those under 30
- Trade union membership can boost the chance of training
- Size matters

These findings have been true for many years and they support the conception of learning as a banking process (see Freire, 1974) in which individuals have their store of knowledge topped up at intervals. Access to formalized learning is clearly important as it is more likely to lead to accreditation of some form and this can be vital for progression to a higher level, to promotion, or to changing jobs. The downside with being overly focused on the learning of individuals as a measurable activity, however, is that attention is taken away from the workplace itself as a learning environment and from the relationship between learning and workplace performance and improvement.

Workplaces exist, of course, to produce goods and services (Rainbird et al, 2004) and they have to function within the boundaries of a broader productive system and political economy (Felstead et al, 2009; Unwin et al, 2007; Hall and Soskice, 2001; Ashton, 2004). This affects employer behaviour with regard to the timescales in which they plan, the risks they are prepared to take, and the levels of discretion they are prepared to give to employees. The conditions for many employees have been gravely affected by the pressure on organizations (in both the public and private sectors) to cut costs and meet

targets, leading to greater work intensification, reduced job security, and, the outsourcing and subcontracting of central services (see Rainbird and Munro, 2003; Lloyd and Payne, 2006). It can be argued, therefore, that to improve learning, we need to improve the conditions of work and within workplaces.

Fuller and Unwin (2004) have characterised this diversity of environments in the form of an 'expansive-restrictive continuum', which combines consideration of the way work is organized with workplace pedagogical practices. An expansive feature would regard workforce development as a vehicle for aligning the twin goals of developing individual and organisational capability. In such environments, learning is regarded as part of work, to be supported by supervisory and managerial processes such as mentoring and coaching, and embedded within appraisal and other review procedures (see also CIPD, 2002; Eraut, 2004; Eraut et al, 1999). In addition, expansive environments recognize that older workers will require support to adjust to new forms of work organisation and the use of new technologies (Tikkanen and Nyhan, 2006), and that younger workers too have valuable expertise that can help in this adjustment (Fuller and Unwin, 2004).

In a survey by Felstead et al (2007b), it was found that younger workers value social relationships in and outside the workplace more than older workers (see also Newton et al, 2005) and, hence, more needs to be done to create the time and space for social interaction during the working day. Similarly, Wright (2006) has argued that, in relation to the National Health Service (NHS) where workplaces are stressful spaces and where individuals may feel lost or disoriented, involvement in e-learning could help to 'anchor' the learner.

To conclude this section, therefore, it is necessary to ask how, given that workplaces are sites for learning, we might make greater use of their potential in order to benefit employers, individuals and society at large. The next section examines how new approaches to VET and lifelong learning might help in this regard.

VET and Lifelong Learning

The use of capital letters when writing the two terms, VET and Lifelong Learning, is deliberate as it positions them as instruments of government policy. In that sense they have become detached from their universal meaning as descriptors of forms of, or approaches to, learning. This is increasingly problematic for it also means that learners and institutions are positioned in relation to which scheme or programme they are attached. Clearly governments have to order the world of education and training in some way so as to ensure it can be funded and inspected and to enable people to participate. Currently, however, VET and Lifelong Learning exist within a policy straitjacket that restricts freedom of movement to both innovate and adapt to the changing needs of individuals, communities and the world of work.

The strings that bind the straitjacket are qualifications (and the associated complex bureaucracy surrounding them). Over recent years, the funding of VET and Lifelong Learning has been increasingly tied to the achievement of nationally recognized qualifications (academic and vocational). As was noted in the previous section, access to accreditation is very important, but the insistence on accreditation means that learning is regarded solely as a process of vertical development and, hence, the equally important concept of learning as contributing to horizontal development is ignored (see Guile and Griffiths, 2003). Vertical development underpins formal education systems and is based on the belief that there is a hierarchy of knowledge that individuals need to acquire step by step. Theory is separated from practice. Horizontal development focuses on the process by which individuals transfer their learning between settings, adapting and

learning new skills and knowledge as they proceed. Thus, in the workplace, much new learning will not be at a higher level, but will be an expansion of existing learning and may even require dropping down to a lower level to acquire the knowledge and skills to refine one's expertise and capability. Guile and Griffiths argue that it is essential that VET programmes are based on curricula frameworks which encourage students to make links between theory and practice, and which place knowledge and skills in their cultural, social, and technological contexts.

This means going way beyond the traditional notions of work experience placements. Some form of work experience has long been seen as an important component of educational programmes (eg sandwich degrees and work experience placements for undergraduates) and is now central to the new 14-19 Diplomas and Foundation Degrees in England¹. The age-old debates about how best to integrate off-the-job learning with on-the-job experience still haunt developments in apprenticeship and other forms of dual-mode VET provision. To facilitate greater integration, much more attention will need to be given to identifying and developing the skill set required by the vocational teacher and trainer of the future, to building stronger relationships between the settings in which VET takes place, and, ultimately, to the creation of VET programmes, which model the way learning occurs in the workplace. For example, research shows how customers and supply chains are playing an increasing role in product innovation, a process of co-configuration from which education and training providers have much to learn. This is not to argue that theory has no place, but rather to say that the learning of theory would reclaim its meaning and relevance as an integral part of vocational learning.

The use of the term lifelong learning as the new pseudonym for adult education or, as was stated earlier, as a catch-all term to cover everything from basic skills and learning for leisure through to learning at, through and for work, is problematic. On the one hand, there is a danger that lifelong learning becomes too tied to economic imperatives or, on the other hand, that it is seen as a meaningless slogan captured all too well in cartoons in which adults ask if they are to be condemned to lifelong homework.

Beer (2007) has proposed that the triadic nature of lifelong learning positions it as a rallying cry:

- For economic progress and development
- For personal development and fulfilment
- For social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity; fundamental to building a more democratic polity and set of social institutions

Decisions about who should pay for lifelong learning, how much should be subsidized by government, and to what extent it should embrace what NIACE has referred to as 'really useless knowledge' and what used to be called 'liberal adult education' cannot be easily answered when the term is used in such a promiscuous way.

Finally, a further way in which the connections between workplace learning, VET and lifelong learning need to be strengthened concerns the current failure to treat publicly funded education and training institutions as workplaces. Whilst there is some research on the type and effect of staff development programmes within these institutions and

¹ Although the arguments and themes in this paper apply equally across the UK, it must be acknowledged that, as a result of devolved government, there is now divergence within the UK in terms of the conception of and resulting policies for workplace learning, VET and lifelong learning.

there is a tradition of the teacher as a reflective practitioner dating back to the 1970s, the concept of the school, college or university as a workplace has, ironically, been virtually ignored (see Hodkinson et al, 2004, for a notable exception). Much needs to be done to rectify this situation including, for example, the re-configuration of the way work is organized and the design of work spaces to enable much greater team working, collective learning and sharing of expertise. The importance of how work space is designed has been shown to have a considerable impact on the quality of learning environments (ref), yet in further education colleges in England staff rooms are being removed as building are configured to provide as much space as possible for learners, whilst teachers are required to use 'hot desks' and to regard classrooms and workshops as their sole work space.

Conclusions

In considering how workplace learning, VET and lifelong learning will need to evolve over the coming years, current conceptions about the nature of learning and work, about skills and vocational knowledge, and about the relationship of theory to practice will need to be subject to considerable interrogation. Such a reappraisal will need to take place within a context that has a range of information to hand, including in relation to the changing nature of work and developments in technology, particularly ICT. The increased importance of so-called soft skills, aesthetic skills and emotional intelligence is beyond the remit of this paper, but this poses further challenges to the curriculum and pedagogy of VET and lifelong learning.

The following questions provide a further indication of the extent to which we need to examine current conceptions and structures:

1. How might more effective and innovative forms of partnerships be created between the stakeholders involved in workplace learning, VET and lifelong learning?
2. To what extent are existing qualifications adequate for both accrediting individuals' expertise and potential, and for providing a solid platform for progression within work and for entry to both vertical and horizontal levels of study?
3. How might we better enable personnel in workplaces and education and training institutions to work more closely together to develop innovative programmes and pedagogies for the development of skills and vocational knowledge?
4. How might the design of institutions be configured to ensure they provide more conducive conditions for employee learning?

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