Researching Workplace Learning and Class

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Abstract

Much more is learned in the workplace than efficient skills. We have rather few concepts with which to theorise the 'counter-cultural' nature of much workplace learning. In leading off four articles that address this gap, this introduction dips into Australian labour history to open a discussion aimed at making visible some of the other learning that occurs at work. It asks why most workplace learning researchers have not acknowledged or extended such learning, and suggests that changing working conditions within universities may change this.

Introduction

We have become accustomed to hearing the activity of 'learning' discussed as if it had no object. Yet what we learn at work is surely as important a focus of research as how we learn. How is it possible, at the level of practice, to separate the 'what' of learning from its 'how'? Just as there is no learning without learners, there is likewise no learning unless something is being learned. This overview seeks to re-surface that aspect of the content of learning in workplaces which has been least discussed over the past twenty years. This is the largely invisible learning, through working relations, that society is highly unequal, and divided on class lines, and that learners have a capacity to organise to change these class relations. Under what conditions does workplace learning result in workers acquiring such an understanding? In asking this question, the articles that follow seek to explain why most academic researchers fail to see some of the most important features of workplaces and the learning that occurs within them.

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Including Class in Theories of Workplace Learning

There has always been a 'counter-cultural' learning tradition among workers. When the nineteenth century British industrial bourgeoisie set up 'Useful Knowledge Societies', to teach workers the basic science needed to participate in new forms of production, the Chartists responded by calling for 'Really Useful Knowledge', 'the knowledge we need to get ourselves out of our present troubles.' By really useful knowledge, they meant an understanding of history and sociology, and of the 'science of socialism' (Boughton 1996). Nineteenth century working class organizations did not oppose 'useful knowledge': what they opposed were attempts to restrict workers' learning to such knowledge. They never snubbed their nose at 'skill' — on the contrary, skill was at the core of working class self-identity; and the ways and means to pass it on were a legitimate subject for labour organizations to debate. Today, however, workplace learning researchers need to reconnect with that other, submerged strand of workplace learning — the long tradition of independent working class education, historically championed by trade unions and socialist and communist political organizations that continues up to the present, in at least some workplaces in some countries; and is linked to movements for social change, including the labour movement (Boughton 2003, 2005). This group of articles seeks to this type of worker learning back inside the field, as a legitimate object of study.

Class analysis is not new to the field of adult education. The organisation which published the Communist Manifesto was known as the International Workers Educational Association, long before a British bishop chose a similar name for Oxford University's educational turn to the workers. Oxford's WEA engaged in vigorous debate with its more class-aware counterparts in the Plebs Leagues and the Labour Colleges before WW1. The Carnegie-funded push to professionalisation of university adult education was not unrelated to its concern at the growing hegemony of class-based approaches to the education of adults (Boughton 1997; 2005). Even the post-WW2 anti-communist frenzy — not unlike the anti-terrorist frenzy of today — could not prevent class pushing its unwelcome 'head' into adult education debates in the 1960s and 1970s, helped along by the work of Brazilian, Paulo Freire. Contemporary adult education courses acknowledge many Marxist theorists, such as Foley (1999; 2001) and Holst (2002). Marxist research in adult education has, however, not engaged very much with the literature of workplace learning (see however Grossman 2005). Perhaps this is because it was within the so-called 'liberal' tradition of university adult education that several important Marxists found some academic space, people like Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson; and this tradition tended to turn away from 'vocational' education as not really being education at all (Wallis 1996).

From within this liberal tradition, however, and at its more progressive end, the idea that learning occurs within social movements is certainly not new. Tawney, one of the founders of that tradition, wrote that all educational move-

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ments have been social movements, movements enlivened by a view of a different kind of society:

> All serious educational movements have … been social movements. They have been the expression in one sphere — the training of mind and character — of some distinctive conception of the life proper to man and the kind of society in which he can best live it (Quoted in Lovett 1988: xv).

More recently, the concept of social movement learning has generated some interesting research. However, it has tended to focus on the learning that occurs when people take to the streets and engage in the politics of protest (Finger 1989; Welton 1993b; Crowther 1997). Mass actions, including strikes, are clearly one of the sites in which workers learn about the nature of their society, and the relationship they have as a class with employers and governments. But my own research on radical labour movement traditions, a little of which is described below, suggests that such moments are just that, moments; and that the learning through which a person becomes a working class activist happens as much on the job doing everyday things. It is useful to think in terms of a counter-culture within the working class where meanings are being made of what happens everyday, meanings which are not 'legitimised' as the kind of knowledge or understanding that researchers mean when they speak of workplace learning.

Learning from History

In previous research, I examined the adult learning that took place within the communist movement in Australia. This system of formal and non-formal adult education — its network of study circles and party 'schools' — only made sense because it helped people to understand and learn from the experiences they were having at work. Militant workers only learned, as U.S. popular educator Myles Horton famously put it, from the experiences they learned from. This is best illustrated by example[1]. One informant, Hal Alexander, joined the Communist Party in 1941. He described a typical party branch class, attended by members from the Eveleigh Railway Workshop. After an 8–9 hour day at work, Hal and his mates would 'grab a pie and a few beers, then off to class.' It was, he said, 'a real act of consciousness' to do it. There was a reading for each class, e.g. for a class on 'The United Front', they were meant to have to read Lenin's *Left Wing Communism*:

> People struggled through it. 'Who's read the material?', the tutor would ask at the start. Everyone shuffled their feet. If the tutors were blokes who were workers themselves, it was good, there'd be a lot of chiacking[2], a friendly atmosphere, comradely. It'd last a couple of hours. Pretty soon, people would get off the reading, and start talking about some right wing bastard on the job, and how to overcome sectarianism in the way they dealt with him. (Boughton 1997)

According to Hal, it was not the texts, but 'the social conditioning of the industrial system' (Hal's words) which was the real education. They studied

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their own experiences as workers. Discussion would always end talking about work issues, such as the weekly general union meeting coming up. For Hal, this simply demonstrated what he called 'the sterility of theory, unless it's conveyed into practice … Practice comes first, it's the source of theory.' (Boughton 1997)

From the oral and pictorial and documentary records with which labour historians work, one can read a complex history of learning, of how people adjusted and changed and sometimes resisted and sometimes initiated workplace change, slowly over time creating the workplaces of today through their own agency. Much of this learning would clearly be recognisable to contemporary workplace learning researchers, in that it was about how to complete the job in new circumstances, as new technology was developed, as production techniques changed, and as capitalism expanded on a global scale. But it was also about how to ensure that workplaces became safer, how to ensure that the benefits of increased productivity were to be returned at least in part to those who applied the technologies, how to look after each other in times of difficulty, how to resist when the pressure to produce more for less grew too great, how to support each other across state and even national boundaries, and how to sing and laugh and preserve a sense of collective humanity in the face of sometimes overwhelming alienation. Is this not workplace learning? And if it is, why does so little of it appear in the pages of the articles written on the topic?

The work of Rushbrook and Brown (2001), Brown (2003), and Taksa (2003) on the scientific management movement, brought to Australia during WW1 by university-based adult educators associated with the Workers Education Association provides an example, which pre-figures in important ways the competency movement in vocational education. Research in the archives of the CPA and the Australian Railways Union reveals that, in response to the introduction of Taylorist efficiency principles in the Victorian railways, early workers control campaigns emerged that were then passed on via generations of railway workers, to re-emerge in the shop committee movement of the 1950s, and the self management initiatives of the 1970s (Boughton et al. 2002). Similarly, Linda Cooper's (2001/2) recovery and analysis of workers' learning during the anti-apartheid struggle shows again the richness of workplace countercultures. Adult education historians like Mike Welton (1993a) have critiqued the effects of a historical amnesia in adult education, that allows such learning to be overlooked. Welton argues that hegemonic practices become hegemonic in part by excluding from the historical record those resistant practices with which they had to struggle to achieve their dominance.

The Learning of Identity

To say that identity and learning are linked is commonplace, though 'identity' politics often fails to acknowledge class as an identity (Burgmann 2003). Moreover, in the Marxist tradition, class identity is not static or individualistic. Rather, it is a living, collective social force, which emerges with more or less clarity in different historical periods; present, as E. P. Thompson put it, at its own mak-

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ing (Thompson 1968). Classes construct themselves through collective industrial, political, intellectual, social and cultural activities; and can be 'deconstructed', also, by similar activities. They have a material reality, which includes the consciousness learned inside specific social practices. This should not be problematic for workplace learning researchers, since it resonates with the notion of 'on-job', or 'situated learning':

> The fourth area of interest is within learning theory which now emphasises *the construction of knowledge being mediated by social and cultural circumstances in which knowledge is experienced*. It is held that in a situated approach to learning, the authenticity of activity and circumstances assist the development of knowledge and its transfer (Billett 1995: 21; my emphasis).

In formal education institutions, adult education has moved, in the last few decades, beyond the genderless, classless and 'self-directed' adult learner 'invented' by North American theorists, to acknowledge that people learn in and through collective identities and the practices which constitute them (Cevero and Wilson 1999). More recently, we have begun to acknowledge that different identities construct different knowledges, whose value is also socially-determined. We also acknowledge that identity itself is learned, and 'unlearned'.

The practices in which we engage help us to take on different identities. In the practices of the market, where goods are exchanged, the social nature of human production appears to us as a relation between products. It is only when we move from the sphere of exchange, the market, to the sphere of production that it becomes possible to discover that we ourselves, as workers, are the source of the value of the commodities we exchanged in the market. In other words, *at work*, in the right circumstances, we can learn that cooperation is a fundamental condition of human existence. We can learn the theory of surplus value, whereby labour produces capital, and how this helps explain the cycle of boom and bust. We can certainly learn about globalisation. We can learn to read our world, in words which serve our own interests, not those for whom our 'illiteracy', our inability to name our own exploitation, is a source of power.

Research Practice as Conflicted Work

In every workplace, the questions of who will exercise power, and whose knowledge will count as authoritative, are constantly renegotiated (Cevero and Wilson 1999). Identity, the question of 'who' is the subject of the verb 'to learn,' is never far from the surface of these conflicts. There tends to be an automatic assumption that the learning 'subject' is an individual. This assumption sits alongside, and in no apparent tension, with the quite sophisticated notion that much workplace learning is 'situated' (Billett 1995) in 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Formal education is a structured social practice, and educational institutions are places of work. One of the things that the work practices of formal study encourage, among other things, is the development of highly differentiated individual identities, and this increases the further through the system we

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progress. Intellectual work, like all work, it occurs within specific social relations. But the form of those relations will constrain the capacity of those working within them in terms of what is and is not 'obvious.' Within formal education, the commodification of education in recent years has reinforced this trend to individualisation, as we begin to see learning as an essentially private investment (Boughton 2005). But this is a contradictory development, because commodities are produced primarily for their exchange value, not their use value, and to the extent that this becomes visible, we can quickly learn something new.

Most workplace learning research has focused on how workers learn what they need to know in order to produce more efficiently and effectively the products and services which generate wealth for the industry in which they are engaged. The issue is why some learning experiences are not 'authorised' as a source of legitimate knowledge. Class is one particularly important 'community of practice' from which workers can learn. Intellectually-trained researchers have hitherto largely been able to conduct their own work in institutions enjoying relative autonomy from capitalist production relations. As education becomes commodified, class contradictions are becoming clearer to academics. The impact on research questions remains to be seen.

The 'left wing' of workplace learning research has so far mounted a critique which remains largely within assumptions laid out by capital itself. For example, some authors argue the need for workers' interests to be taken into account in the types of learning opportunities made available at work, seeing this as a legitimate part of the ongoing struggle around wages and conditions. Spencer's critical review of workplace learning initiatives, illustrates, he says, that 'the challenging questions for adult educators and researchers are to be found around education for workplace democracy':

> How does this educational opportunity benefit workers? Who will have access to this learning? Will the educational opportunities prepare workers for the democratization of work? Is the claim that workers are empowered real? How far does it go in giving workers influence in the affairs of the corporation? Are the gains made, particularly the capital (or value-added) gains, equitably distributed? What public policies can be developed to promote workers' rights including broadly based educational opportunities? (Spencer 2002: 304).

This is important work which connects directly to the current state of debate within the labour movement about training. Nevertheless, it stops short of investigating and theorising the more revolutionary learning that occurs and has occurred historically in the workplace — a questioning of the basis of wage labour itself.

Conclusion

It is a radical axiom that the intellectual development of the working class ensues from united action and discussion (Engels 1980 (1969): 103). The next article shows how an Australian union covering low-paid workers, has extend-

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ed the boundaries of trade union education to focus on practical activism in pursuit of workers' rights, as defined above by Spencer. It is followed by a study from South Africa, arguing that class consciousness can emerge in a diversity of ways — both from action, whether on the streets or more routinely on the shop-floor, and also from formal learning. These studies lead to an analysis of the actual processes through which heterodox learning and practice occur. This journey takes us to a guardedly optimistic answer to the question, 'why don't Australian workers want to be working class any more?'

Notes

[1] For a more complete account of this educational work, see Boughton (2005).

[2] 'Chiacking', for overseas readers, is old Australian slang for 'making fun of', or, more colloquially 'taking the piss'.

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