

Varieties of Workplace Learning: An Introduction

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Despite twenty years of training reform¹ in Australia, there are widespread concerns about a 'skills crisis'. This raises the question: to what extent is this a training crisis, and to what extent is it a crisis in the retention of skilled workers, exacerbated by the new relationships of the workplace? In assembling two quite distinct sets of viewpoints, this symposium invites readers to adopt a broad view of worker education. It includes voices who argue that skills training is but one element of workplace learning, the other being the acquisition of contextual knowledge, formal or tacit, about the employer-employee relationship. The first perspective is a critique of a recent attempt to train managers in the efficient use of 'relationship' skills. From here, a longer-term perspective demonstrates how the narrow skills approach can be traced to diffusion of Taylor's educational theory through formal and community-based vocational education systems in NSW. A new perspective is then introduced by a conversation among adult educators, who take the view that workplace learning inevitably involves learning about employer/employee relations. Contributions from South Africa, Canada and Australia consider the relationship between practical activity and the gaining of two aspects of this awareness — union activism and class consciousness. They explore approaches to union renewal and employee participation in shaping learning. Noting the decline of working class communities and of working class education movements, the symposium ends with a suggested explanation for the fluctuating class awareness of those whom the Australian labour movement is currently addressing as 'working people'.

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In the first decade of the 21st century, 'learning' has moved centre-stage. Learning cities, learning towns, and learning organisations multiply, and the learning that occurs within workplaces has become a major focus of research. In the process, a new generation of management theorists, specialising in organisational learning and human resource development, have joined with a much longer tradition of scholarship in adult education, a field which began its life in the nineteenth century among university-based intellectuals concerned with 'worker education', and went on to spawn a professional discipline in the 20th century dedicated to the study of the ways that adults learn. When the two 'strands' converge around studies of learning in workplaces, significant contradictions emerge. These contradictions are reflected in the two-part symposium that follows.

It is now twenty years since *Australia Reconstructed* (ACTU/TDC 1987). The skill formation project that it launched, designed to turn Australia into 'the clever country' through the National Training Reform Agenda, appears to have foundered, the dominant discourse now being of a 'skills crisis'. This crisis is understood as a skills shortage — the inability of employers to hire people with competences for specified tasks. This kind of shortage occurs when there has not been enough training, or (more precisely) completed training in various occupations. Employers and employees agree that such shortages are occurring in Australia now, and creating productivity bottlenecks. But part of the skills shortage is actually a labour shortage — employers' inability to fill vacancies because conditions are not good enough to attract or retain workers in the jobs for which they are trained. Moreover, the 'skills' that employers are seeking, such as some 'employability skills', may in fact be little more than willingness to accept certain types of relationship with employers — relationships of 'flexibility' or compliance, for example. Conversely, employers may be failing to recognise some required behaviour as skilled, particularly in service industries. Thus skill and employer/employee relations seem to be tied up together. The two-part symposium that follow. juxtaposes 'objective' and 'relational' perspectives on workplace learning. The first perspective remains in the domain of skill acquisition, whilst the second perspective, reflected in a 'symposium within the symposium', addresses the political education of workers, starting from the premise that workplace learning inevitably includes learning about labour relations, and indeed about class relations. The symposium thus juxtaposes what used to be called 'useful knowledge' and 'really useful knowledge'. The skills shortage suggests that employees are in the last instance dependent on workers' acquiring and practising 'useful knowledge', and employees may well need to regain a voice in shaping and deploying this knowledge before they are prepared to use it.

Yet the most recent attempt to forge a tripartite consensus on skill, productivity, added value and international competitiveness turned out to be short-lived. Its legacy of competency-based training lingers. Anne Rozario and Ian Hampson note a declining faith in the competency approach at vocational education policy levels, counter-balanced by a sense that the competency apparatus is just too hard to jettison. They explore a training initiative that originated from the mid-1990s

belief, epitomised in the Karpin Report, that Australia's international competitiveness was being held back by lack of managerial skills. This initiative focused on supervisors — the 'frontline managers' responsible for securing worker compliance with productivity initiatives. Writing from a pluralist perspective, Rozario and Hampson provide empirical documentation of the 'fuzziness' of attempts to inculcate and assess generic 'frontline managerial' competences. The Frontline Management Initiative assumed a unity of interests amongst workers, supervisors, managers and other stakeholders. It represented a view that if supervisors were fully competent, workplace conflict would disappear or at least diminish, and productivity would therefore be enhanced. The authors point out, however, that increased workplace productivity in the 1990s involved a work intensification that eroded the spare time needed for the pursuit of workplace learning, even in supervisory skills. They also note that it was a brave assumption on the part of the framers of the Frontline Management Initiative, that if given the opportunity for 'self-directed learning', supervisors would take on the entrepreneurial identity intended.

Lucy Taksa takes us back to the origins of attempts to link efficiency and skill through the organisation of education systems. She notes that Taylor himself proposed educational reforms, and examines the diffusion of scientific management theory within Australian education practice. She traces the efforts of early twentieth century management 'gurus', consultants, managers, educational administrators and related professionals who sought to transform industrial culture by reforming workers' education and training. The resulting infusion of scientific management into the administration and content of tertiary, technical and adult education had long-term consequences, echoed in the most recent Training Reform Agenda.

Following these two critical management perspectives, the remaining symposium contributors bring a viewpoint from an older adult education tradition that has historic links with wider concerns about democracy and social justice, but that has recently felt itself pushed to the margins of a fast-growing research industry focused almost entirely on what U.S. adult educationalist Phyllis Cunningham (1993) termed 'learning for earning'. Bob Boughton introduces members of this international group who since 1999 have contributed to conferences on Researching Work and Learning (RWL). The group has grown strongly, attracting critics of the views that 'knowledge workers' form the main growth area in the labour market, and that 'knowledge industries' are the way of the future. The contributors have backgrounds within trade union education, or within the wider field of adult education and community development among impoverished and marginalised communities, including working class, Indigenous and immigrant communities, in countries of both the north and the south. As practicing educators, they locate themselves within the radical adult education tradition most commonly referred to these days as popular education (Crowther, Galloway and Martin 2005). As researchers, they share a concern that the research agendas which currently dominate the field of workplace learning are insuffi-

ciently attuned to the distinct interests of organised labour and working people of the majority world. In the word of Peter Sawchuk, one of the contributors:

Workplace learning, from the standpoint of workers, is not limited to the goals of profitability. It is a model of learning that includes productivity and efficiency, but puts the direct, social needs of the majority of workplace participants (i.e. workers) first: a concern for quality jobs, participatory control over the organisation of work and a role in the control of change initiatives. (Sawchuk 2001)

Here, these writers explore a very specific type of workplace learning — the ways that workers learn class consciousness, in and through their work. ‘Class’ is at present an embarrassing and illegitimate term for many academics. Since the 1970s, there has been an ongoing debate among social scientists about the value of this concept as a tool of analysis. While acknowledging the historical specificity of class relations, the importance of other axes of oppression including gender and ethnicity, and the diverse forms with which working classes form and act in different countries at different periods, the five contributors agree that the denial of class relations and their salience is slowing down the process whereby workers come to an awareness of their common and distinct interests. They argue that they cannot, as intellectual workers studying workplaces, pretend to sit outside the relations of production. In seeking to re-surface the concept of class, they are aiming to help form a consciousness among workers that their interests differ from those of their employers.

In briefly introducing his four research colleagues, Bob Boughton challenges what he sees as the ideological stance of human resource practitioners and academics, who fail to surface their own value stances within the knowledge production process. For these people, he argues

...workplace or work-related learning [is] often seen as an essential part of ‘capturing’ employee subjectivity in achieving corporate adherence to the new workplace culture and ultimately to achieve corporate objectives (Spencer 2005).

Tony Brown and Linda Cooper also analyse learning about relations of the workplace. Brown writes in the Australian context, where under the Work-Choices legislation, since the end of 2005 there is a prohibition, attracting a \$33,000 fine, on any organisation’s including a clause in a collective agreement that would entitle employees to leave to attend union training sessions (OEA 2007). Against this backdrop, he analyses recent developments in the so-called ‘organising model’ and the learning required to implement it, within the Australian Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMWU). His focus is on workers’ and their unions’ acquiring ‘critical thinking’ capacity, a concern with union renewal, and attention to the emancipatory learning that will be needed for unions to survive and grow in an era of increasingly constraining labour laws.

In addressing the process question of how workers learn, Brown shows how the LHMU has taken the concept of union education far beyond formal classroom sessions. He discusses imaginative extensions of the ‘organising model’,

adapting the 'mainstream' concept of learning organisations. He uses the mainstream notion of the learning organisation as a tool for analysing imaginative extensions of the 'organising model' of union renewal.

When read together, Brown's and Linda Cooper's case studies demonstrate the highly contextual nature of union learning. Cooper, a labour educator with many years experience in the South Africa trade union movement, provides an account based on her doctoral research into the South African trade union movement, examines forms of learning in the South African municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU). Using case study interviews, Cooper provides a fine-grained analysis of processes by which SAMWU workers acquired political consciousness. She picks up and interprets for us the nuances of a range of learning experiences within the workplace and the union. She demonstrates the important learning that took place when a novice shop steward came to understand that the manager also experienced fear whilst negotiating a grievance. She analyses the learning and teaching processes that occurred during a strike by SAMWU workers - inheritors of a Western Cape union tradition of non-striking.

In analysing formal union training sessions, Cooper argues that the opposition between didactic and 'facilitative' teaching is a questionable one. Drawing on the mainstream theory of 'situated learning' (Lave and Wenger 1991), she suggests that unions are creating 'communities of professional practice' in workplaces, in a way that parallels professional learning in a range of 'knowledge-based' industries.

The fourth contribution to the symposium, from Canadian adult education theorist Peter Sawchuk, develops new theoretical concepts adequate to an analysis of both the content and process of learning about work. His model is equally relevant to the learning of the skills of work performance, and the learning of contextual awareness of workplace relationships. Using data from his extended study of working class learning in Canada, he illustrates the complex theoretical model he and others have been developing in order to explain why some workers learn class consciousness at work, while others learn 'despondency, withdrawal or enthusiastic self-commodification and manic careerism'. His model is based on an activity theory of learning, derived from the work of Vygotsky in the first half of the twentieth century, built on by Leont'ev, and widely used amongst Finnish education researchers. Sawchuk's model, more fully elaborated in his study of how workers learn technology (Sawchuk 2003), combines this psychological approach with labour process theory and draws on the marxian distinction between use value and exchange value.

The basis of Sawchuk's model, as set out here, is a conceptualisation of all goal-directed knowledge, both organisational and everyday, as being socially mediated through tools (material and symbolic artefacts), rules and divisions of labour. He provides a subtle analysis of the alternating processes of interiorisation and practice, through which learning occurs. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* as a relational disposition, he looks at the cognitive, emotional and social dimensions of learning. Class emerges as a matrix for learning

about work, and the tension between use and exchange values is used to explain the distinction between forms of work knowledge deemed 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate'.

The last paper, by Teri Merlyn, an Australian historian of the popular education tradition in adult education, picks up on a theme Sawchuk raises early in his paper, the 'evisceration' of working class communities which were once the site of much of the class conscious learning that helped underpin militant unionism for much of the twentieth century. Merlyn traces the ebb and flow of class consciousness and the shifting nature of 'working-class identity' in Australia, touching on immigration, politics and economic cycles of depression and prosperity, as well as education. Acknowledging the centrality of education in identity construction, she calls for a re-invigoration of adult education aimed at historical recovery.

Merlyn provides a sweeping overview of working class education in England, from the Lollards to the Chartists, and in non-Indigenous Australia, covering contests over middle class 'conspiracies of benevolence' to shape workers' ideas. She provides a particularly poignant nineteenth century example of the marginalisation of working class intellectuals from the determination of the content of education - the case of the initiator of the Melbourne Working Men's College who was relegated to the role of College caretaker. Merlyn interprets the rugged individualism of the 'Aussie battler' as an expression of a sense of inequality without class consciousness. She sees its most recent manifestation in the mums 'n' dads shareholders to whom John Howard appeals, and argues that the ACTU's mobilisation against Work Choices is being hampered by the use of the currently favoured term 'working people' — a term which she sees as failing to revive a sense of class identity.

Conclusion

This symposium engages with the two key debates on work and education. Firstly, how do workers become productive in their specific occupations and industries? And secondly, what broader social understandings do workers need in order to play an active role in political life? The past two decades have seen a focus on the first of these questions: 'training' has dominated 'political education'; 'skills' have overwhelmed 'political consciousness'. There has been no shortage of literature on national technical and vocational training systems, competency based training and the worldwide trend towards forms of national, and in some cases international, qualifications frameworks.⁴ Within the adult and vocational education 'mainstream', the 'systems' literature has been counterpointed by a burgeoning interest in the situated and tacit nature of the processes of workplace learning — territory recently mapped by Fenwick (2006). The first two articles in the symposium bring critical perspectives to aspects of the training policy and systems question. The remaining re-surface the recently more silenced question — that of the political education of workers. The sophisticated analysis of learning processes in at least one article applies equally well to the acquisition of 'authorised' and 'unauthorised' workplace knowledge.

Historically, labour movement debates on education and training have swung between focusing on skills development and on political consciousness. At present in Australia, it appears that, despite two decades of the former focus, there has been a growing skill shortage, and a deterioration in the basic conditions under which many work and organise. A labour movement cannot exercise much control over skills policy if it lacks the industrial and political power which grows from the exercise of leadership within workplaces and communities. The possibility of intervening in the skills debate strongly, as for example the manufacturing unions did in the 1980s, was prefaced by several decades' prior work of militant organising and education, building a more class conscious leadership among workers in industry and growing mechanisms of worker control, such as shop committees. This symposium brings together considerations of skills policy with explorations of how to foster a next generation of leaders who will see skills formation as only one part of a broader working class education policy for the twenty-first century.

Notes

¹ Readers wanting to dip into this field should refer to the VOCED database maintained by Australia's National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and UNESCO.

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