

Review Article

Skills and Training: Reflections on a Recent British Contribution to Current Debates

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Grugulis, I. (2008) *Skills, Training and Human Resource Management: A Critical Text*. Palgrave Macmillan, UK.

Introduction¹

The election of the Rudd Labor government will see Australia enter another period of change in its training system. As in the past, training 'reform' will be influenced by information about developments in the UK. This book by Professor Irena Grugulis, a well-known UK commentator on skills, is thus timely and should be of interest to Australian audiences. It seeks not only to describe the British experience, but to situate it internationally and in relation to the latest trends in the literature on skills, training and human resource management.

The international literature on training policy tells us that an effective training regime requires a 'cooperative' approach, in which the major actors (employers, unions, governments and training authorities) work out an accommodation of sorts (Crouch et al 1999). Australia has never been able to achieve a stable 'social settlement' among the main political economic actors, and the past two decades have seen an acceleration of sometimes intense conflict over both industrial relations and training policy. Unions have been systematically and increasingly excluded from the system for the past 12 years. Accordingly, one of the tasks of the new Rudd government is to manage the terms of unions' reinclusion in a manner that neither 'frightens the horses', nor disappoints potentially inflated expectations.

Employers have generally played a role in which the influence afforded to them by the state has not been matched by the wisdom of their policy proposals (Billet 2004). Aggravating matters, Australia has been reluctant to demand too much of employers with respect to training. Further aggravating matters, Australia is a federal structure, with the constitution assigning powers over training and qualifications to the States. This leads to problems of mutual rec-

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ognition of qualifications, undermining the national consistency of both policy and qualifications that is the *sine qua non* of a national training system. 'Unco-operative federalism', in which the Commonwealth may seek to impose policies that the States resist, is an unwelcome characteristic. Taken together, these circumstances produce a level of 'indecisiveness' in training policy and reform. Despite successive waves of training reform, the core problems in the system, which go to the conceptualisation of 'skill' itself, have not been solved. I first introduce the book, then discuss in more detail the issues it addresses in relation to the problems of Australian training. These issues include the structure of the Australian political economy, and the conceptualisation and operationalisation of skill itself.

i) The Book

The book is in Palgrave Macmillan's Management, Work and Organisation series. It is written as a textbook, for specialist masters' and similar courses, not as a research text, and therefore it seeks to cover the field without expressly introducing 'cutting edge' concepts such as researchers would be seeking. The book signals a critical approach, yet it does not engage with any of the established 'conventional' texts on training, some of them in their third editions (eg Goldstein and Ford 2002; Laird et al 2003; Blanchard and Thacker 2008; Noe 2008). Thus it does not, as one might expect from the title, develop a critical perspective on the training processes — needs analysis, design, delivery, evaluation — that are still the bread and butter of the 'conventional' systems approach. Nor does it challenge the 'strategic training' perspective (the idea that training and development activity within firms should serve organisational interests only) which is the outcome of following the training approaches prescribed in the textbooks. The critical nature of the book lies in its Labour Process Theory (LPT) pedigree, and, whilst welcome, it is not directed at a critical evaluation of the mainstream training literature.

The book's stated aims are 'to provide a fuller picture' (p. ix) of 'the nature of skill, work, organisations and societies' — including national systems of Vocational Education and Training (VET) and qualifications. Chapter two discusses 'skill', and chapter three discusses national VET systems. Chapter four describes the British experience of VET, and chapter five returns to the issue of 'skill' — specifically, the ways in which conceptualisations of skill are changing. This discussion moves into chapter six — on emotional and aesthetic labour, while chapter seven discusses culture management, but not the role of training and development in the management of culture (which would be a useful focus for the chapter). Chapter eight claims to outline lessons for management and leadership development. Chapter nine canvasses the 'knowledge work' debate, and the final chapter looks to the future of human resource development. In its attempt to bring recent developments in LPT to bear on training and skill, it reproduces unresolved debates in this tradition.

ii) Situating the Australian Experience: A Very 'Anglo' Training System

In her discussion of national VET systems, (ch. 3) Grugulis points to some of the ways in which national institutional arrangements shape firm-level decision making regarding training. She classifies training systems as either voluntarist or regulated (2008, ch. 3). This categorisation mirrors some elementary taxonomies of capitalism: for example, Dore (2000) distinguishes Anglo-liberal capitalism from 'Rhenish' (regulated). This blunt categorisation underplays the need, for example, to differentiate 'German' and 'Japanese' approaches to regulation.

The core problem of training policy in capitalist economies is that of correcting 'market failure' — or employers' tendency to recruit rather than train because of fear that training investment will be 'poached' by 'free riding' employers (see Crouch 1999). The traditional comparative training literature identifies several national solutions to these problems. Japanese employers recoup investment through lifetime employment; the Germans are said to rely on active external labour markets, albeit 'embedded' in strong national institutions built on trust. This encourages employers to contribute to training. Worker representatives (on works councils) play a strong role in certifying that the training delivered in enterprises conforms to national or industrial curricula and is of high quality and is not simply tailored to employers' short term needs (Streeck 1992). Thus, the German system is seen as solving what is a major problem for a Federation — and Australia is an instance of this — how to make sure that qualifications and skills are transferable across enterprises and between jurisdictions.

Unfortunately, this book relies on descriptions of national systems of training regulation that have not been adequately updated to reflect the effects of globalisation — in particular the tendency for corporations to define themselves as global, not national, citizens, with loyalties to shareholders that transcend any social responsibilities of training at the national level. Nearly ten years ago, Crouch et al (1999) identified a number of reasons why capitalist economies have serious difficulties dealing with training, and argued that these are only going to get worse as economic liberalism and ideologies of 'strategic training' bite. Grugulis has missed an opportunity to provide an update on this literature.

Australia has never been able satisfactorily to resolve the issues addressed in this book, a problem that derives in part from the strong similarities between the British and Australian systems. In the formative years of the current Australian training system, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Australia copied its system of 'competence-based training' from Britain. The British system of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) thus bears some strong similarities to the current Australian system. In the latter, competency standards describe behaviours necessary for the satisfactory completion of discrete job elements, and are linked up in 'training packages' with reference to a national skill recognition framework. This is the reference point for publicly funded and nationally recognised training and assessment delivered by Registered Training Organi-

sations (RTOs) in a training market — another institutional innovation of the past two decades.

The Australian colonial experience paradoxically shaped the emergence of the initial training regime. Agricultural products earned strong export revenues in British markets (Australia enjoyed the world's highest per capita income from 1870 to after 1900). These revenues underpinned the 'Australian Settlement' (Kelly 1994), which consisted of an interlocking set of arrangements known as 'new protection', in which manufacturing industry was protected from import competition, provided employers paid wages set in industrial tribunals, regulated through awards (Castles 1988). The industrial sector remained quite stable, due to industry protection, until the 1970s. The regulation of 'skill' was also stable, being embedded in this industrial relations system. Awards prescribed job territory related to wage levels, skill levels and union membership or coverage. Within this, the tradition survived of the skilled craftsman, inducted into the trade through time-based apprenticeships, supplemented by technical schools, and partly administered by unions — a very British (and particularly male-oriented) model (Pocock 1988).

The system came unstuck from the 1970s. British entry to the European Union closed off the guaranteed markets for agricultural products that had been the mainstay of the system. The oil shocks of the 1970s, the ensuing decade of stagflation, the fiscal crisis of the state, all served to weaken the institutional framework of the 1900–10 'settlement'. From the 1980s, Australian industry, particularly manufacturing, was increasingly required to be internationally competitive. This called for dramatic institutional innovation in training, to serve not only industrial efficiency, but also to open up opportunities for those excluded by the patriarchal bias of the previous system. Australia's first cut at this was the National Training Reform Agenda (NTRA) of the late 1980s. The Labor government incorporated the institutional presence of the union movement through the Accord process (in which unions accepted wage restraint and restrained industrial militancy, in return for influence over policy — in this case training policy). The first part of this story has been told elsewhere (see Hampson 2002). Employers were asked to contribute more to training via a levy on wages, and to cooperate with the new system of competence-based assessment and qualifications. This system collapsed due to employers resisting and/or abusing the system, and the inability or reluctance of the State to restrict employer prerogatives too strongly — by, for example, regulating the practice of training and assessment more firmly. When the ineffectiveness of the system became apparent, another wave of institutional 'innovation' — with strong continuities with the past failed pattern — took place.

Grugulis' (2008: 55ff) account of the 'British' pattern of state intervention has strong resonance here. She identifies the British system as voluntarist, that is leaving employers' prerogatives in the realm of training largely untouched, but with supply side subsidies from the state in an attempt to correct market failure. Complexity ensued with endless organisational and programmatic changes. This pattern of extensive state intervention, but protection of employers' prerogatives, is similar to Australia, and with similar results. As in Britain,

there is a large number of programs, and a long list of Government departments with responsibility for some aspects of training. This produces problems of coordination between arms of the system with overlapping responsibilities (magnified, in the case of Australia, by the Federal system).

The British system of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) was designed to be an overarching system, with a framework against which all qualifications could be measured—exactly like the equivalent in Australia, first the Australian Standards Framework (ASF), then the Australian Recognition Framework (ARF), now the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). But now training and development in Britain, according to Grugulis, is a ‘cottage industry’, with a range of bodies delivering and accrediting (p. 61), and, presumably, serious problems of reliability and validity of assessment across the system. Grugulis’ judgement of NVQs is that they have helped people gain qualifications, but not done much to build skills (p. 69). Similarly, in Australia, despite a large growth in training activity and expenditure, recent evidence from the HILDA dataset indicates that, in aggregate, jobs are *less* skill-intensive in 2005 than in 2001 (Fraser 2008). If qualifications are increasing, yet skills are falling, this may say something about assessment and quality.

Assessment has been a persistent problem with the Australian system. In 1999–2000, a number of inquiries and reports found that employers and some unscrupulous RTOs had been manipulating the system. Employers and RTOs received public subsidies on condition that they delivered nationally accredited training to trainees, who were paid below-award ‘training wages’. However, ‘trainees’ were treated as sources of cheap labour, and sometimes never saw a trainer or assessor (see SEWRSBERC 2000). This put pressure on competency assessment, and many RTOs responded by lowering standards. No-one of course knew the precise extent of these practices. The Liberal Coalition government produced a ‘new’ system, the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), aiming to ‘fix’ the problems, or at least to be seen to be doing something about them. But the system still had, and has, problems with assessment. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI 2008) has a policy on the issue, which notes that ‘RTOs that provide training that actually delivers the required skills and use sound assessment techniques may be more expensive than those which try to do it on the cheap—putting them at a competitive disadvantage’ (ACCI 2008: 3). This recognition challenges the whole philosophy of a training market—yet it candidly expresses the obvious truth that in a market, purchasers will be attracted to the lowest cost product, and producers (trainers and assessors) will need to take price into consideration when they tender for business. This produces a tendency to drive down assessment and output standards: high quality training costs more than lower quality. One of the main concerns of employers who purchase training from an RTO is that, if it is not of high quality, they will have to pick up the pieces by retraining the person themselves on the job (ACCI 2008: 3). There are of course also concerns about various other aspects of safety and quality. The ACCI policy advocates ‘dual sign off’: employers should be part of the assessment process, along with

the assessor. This may, however, not eliminate abuses unless another institutional presence is involved: we turn to this in the final section.

iii) A Very Anglo Concept of 'Skill'

The conception of 'skill' has long been a burning, and unresolved, issue for Australian policymakers. As mentioned earlier, the training reformers in the 1980s adopted the British system of competence based training (see NTB 1992). This is more a system of assessment than of training (*qua* learning), because it claims to distil, into elements and performance criteria, a description of the behaviours necessary to perform a job. Against these 'competency standards', skills can be assessed. The competency standards are supposed to be independent of any particular form of learning and any 'time served' requirement. They supposedly offer an objective form of skill recognition, and this was part of their attraction to the architects of the system. But competency based assessment (CBA) has attracted strong criticism, because it, *inter alia*, neglects underpinning knowledge, or the complexities of 'mastery' in practice, potentially passing people as competent who, although they may be able to perform to standard, do not know what they are doing or why (Wolf 1995). Following labour process theory, Grugulis too argues that competency based training (CBT) neglects underlying knowledge, and 'achieves a Taylorist separation of conception from execution' (p. 62).

Ironically, as skill is decomposed into behavioural 'elements', another problem in the academic and practitioner literature has emerged. This is that the concept of skill (and competence) has expanded, to include a number of attributes required in work organisations. This raises the question of the implications, both for training, and for managerial control of work processes. In Australia, a major review argued that

In this [new] context, technical skills are insufficient; cognitive skills, together with an array of generic skills and dispositions, are of equal importance. Attributes such as problem solving, continuous learning, communication and teamwork, are joined by others such as curiosity, motivation and risk taking. This suggests that contemporary vocational learning should be as much in the business of constructing new worker identities as providing workers with vocational knowledge and skills as traditionally understood. (ANTA 2003: 4)

Many modern work processes do indeed rely on a broad range of human capacities — the issue is how to identify, train and develop them without overwhelming workers' *own* identities, and preventing skill being defined as 'what employers want' (Lafer 2004). A further complication the Review acknowledged is that the prevailing concept of competence is highly individualistic, whereas what constitutes competence in any given situation may have a social aspect — competence may be *collective*. The Review argued that this is an essentially 'European' perspective, and it referred to the work of Boreham et al (2002) and Sandberg (2000), who have proposed the notion of collective competence (Boreham, 2004). 'Competence is seen as the interaction of individual, group, managerial,

and technological systems which when brought together affect organisational competence. It is never individual but collective' (ANTA 2003: 20). The Review suggested there was a fundamental need to rethink CBT and training packages in their current form, but it offered few clues as to how this might be done. Can Grugulis take us forward on these issues?

Grugulis tells us traditional labour process theory, along with the broader training literature, has tended to see 'skill' through the lens of manufacturing and the skilled craft worker, and has emphasised technical know how, manual dexterity and spatial awareness (p. 73). But, as she points out, there has been a shift not only in what skills are important, but in the meaning of the term 'skill' itself (p. 72). The term now includes a range of capacities — various (relatively 'hard') competencies, psychological traits, attitudes to work, and naïve employer-generated wish-lists of the ideal employee.

In Australia, employers have proposed their list of 'employability skills'. These include communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, learning, technology. Employers also define certain personal attributes and values as 'skills': loyalty, commitment, honesty and integrity, enthusiasm, reliability, personal presentation, commonsense, positive self esteem, sense of humour, balanced attitude to work and home life, ability to deal with pressure, motivation, adaptability (ACCI 2002: 5). Employers want to see these included in competency standards and training packages, and to be the object of training and assessment. The High Level Review of Training Packages (2003, 2004) agreed that employability skills should be 'embedded' in training packages, leaving a very difficult task for training package developers and policymakers, trainers and educators, not to mention employees. The challenges in developing measureable discrete job elements for 'sense of humour' are obvious. Conceptualisation of 'skill' is thus an ongoing and serious issue.

Grugulis rightly points out that employers have always had these conceptions of the 'good bloke' (p. 79), but they weren't defined as skills. Now, when they are so defined, there are some serious implications for employees — when discipline and compliance are defined as 'skills', resistance, lack of motivation and non-compliance can be portrayed as incompetence. 'Skill' may lose its bargaining leverage for workers, and thus it may lose its effectiveness as a means of resistance. As Grugulis notes, the new components of 'skill' also contain the potential for discrimination, as they come with inbuilt gender and class — and sometimes racial — bias. Relabelling these attitudes and behaviours as 'skills' is a confusing process that individualises responsibility, reinforces disadvantage and sidelines technical skills (p. 90). These are good critical points. Grugulis approvingly quotes Lafer (2004): these are not skills, but 'measures of commitment, which one chooses to give or withhold based on the conditions of work offered' (p. 81). She persists 'Are they really skills? Probably not, and there are many other words that describe these attributes better' (p. 90). But her own formulation — 'skill-less skills' (p. 90), is perhaps less than illuminating. As she points out 'conceptually, this is messy' (p. 73).

Grugulis notes how the developments in the conceptualisation of 'skill' as identified above, individualise responsibility for poor performance. This concept of skill is an 'Anglo' one because skill is viewed as the property of the individual, tied to 'employability', in a way deeply embedded in Anglo liberalism (see Boreham 2004). Grugulis does not tease out the distinctive features of Anglo concepts of skill, by contrasting them to alternative ones, in which skill is embedded in, and reflects, its cultural and political context or situation. She tentatively touches on the notion of 'collective competence' — noting how some work may be a collective act 'so the soft skills described are an aspect of joint working rather than an individual quality. Soft skills are important at work, but it is not clear whether they are generic, [or] whether they are possessed by individuals [or a collective] ...' (p. 75). But Grugulis ultimately retreats to 'skill' as the property of individuals.

Similarly, the Australian discourse around 'employability skills' makes employability an individual responsibility. But in the European Union, the discourse around employability contains a mix of the Anglo Liberal model, and elements of a 'Scandinavian' approach — in which employability is partly a *collective* responsibility of society, involving the provision of skills for 'collective capital' as well as the well-being of citizens. This approach problematises institutional and political processes as well as individual characteristics (Garsten and Jacobsson 2004: 9). The European Round Table of Industrialists quoted in ACER (2001: 32), also mentions 'a sense of service to the community, civic mindedness' as a desirable employability requirement. These concerns certainly seem far from the preoccupations of Anglo policymakers — in the UK or Australia (as a Senate report noted in the case of Australia — [SEWRSBERG 2000]). The notions of collective competence and employability are more comprehensive than individual notions and, as follows from the next section, contain more possibilities for resolving the theoretical problems around 'skill'.

iv) Skill in the Service Sector: 'A Sense of Proportion'?

In Australia, as in many other countries, the shift from manufacturing to services has been pronounced, and has made strong demands on the training system. Service work is a broad category, including everything from retail, clerical, and cleaning, to call centre work, education and health care. Labour process debates have focussed on call centre work, which has usually — but not always — been portrayed as low skilled and highly controlled. This reflects the established 'deskilling' traditions of labour process theory (LPT), which argue that capitalism tends to 'deskill' and control work — a tendency very visible on the moving assembly line. The question of deskilling led to a hiatus in LPT research in more 'traditional' work contexts, and the topic has resurfaced in services. Service work (as in manufacturing itself), is more likely to fall victim to employer and researcher non recognition of performance demands and skills, with potential consequences for equity.

The most frequently discussed form of service sector work is that which requires emotional expression. The term 'emotional labour' has been applied to the work done, for example, by customer service representatives or care

workers of various kinds. But it also may apply to work where the worker's appearance and manner are part of the product — so called 'aesthetic labour'. Furthermore, these 'skills' of emotional, visual and aural presentation may be intertwined with other skills that, whilst less controversial, have not yet been fully catalogued. These include the capabilities required for information management, coordination, and awareness-management. So, what are the new forms of 'skill' necessary to perform 'emotional labour', or the work of projecting organisationally desired emotions, whatever one's own 'real' feelings? What forms of skill, if any, are required to perform 'aesthetic labour': the work of 'looking good and sounding right'? And with what other forms of work and skill — individual and collective — are they intertwined?

Grugulis (ch. 6) portrays interactive service sector work as deskilled, because it is routinised and controlled (p. 24). As an example she points to call centres, which 'are very highly regulated, with computer prompts and company scripts guiding workers through appropriate responses and actions' (p. 22). Emotion work involves workers in simulating emotions they do not always feel, and subordinating their emotional expression to the needs of customers and clients (p. 110). The effort required to simulate and conceal feelings can be exhausting, and employees may react, burn out and so on (p. 110). Emotion work is an 'unequal exchange that strips the worker of their right to consideration as a human being' (p. 111). On the other hand, Grugulis argues that 'employees are not empty spaces to be moulded to managerial designs': resistance does take place. Workers can, and do, protest against emotion work, resisting and misbehaving, as well as cooperating and complying (p. 108). Emotional labour, it seems, is a contradictory phenomenon: people who work with their emotions report higher degrees of job satisfaction (p. 96, 108). This is a confusing set of observations which reflects underlying tensions in conceptualisation.

There are two points to take up: first, there is considerable diversity among call centre work processes, some being routinised, others more 'relational and empathetic' (Russell 2004; Bolton and Houlihan 2005: 689). These different work processes make varying requirements on skills. Second, although call centre work may be *structured* to be '... repetitive, routinised, and dominated by short cycle times and the prioritisation of quantitative call throughput...' (Taylor and Bain 2004: 17), this might not necessarily indicate low levels of skill — in fact, maintaining a regular workflow itself, in face of 'production contingencies' might require other skills — named elsewhere 'work process skills' (Boreham et al 2002). It is therefore misleading, as LPT sometimes does, to define without empirical inquiry a work process as *unskilled* simply because it is *routinised*.

Grugulis herself seems to allow the possibility of unrecognised skills in the interactive service work process. As she notes, the work done by women tends to be ranked as lower skilled than work done by men, even when it is more complex (p. 15, 82). She points out that 'the most routinised [jobs] offer hidden spaces for decision making' (p. 165), and 'detailed accounts of even apparently routinised jobs reveal hidden depths of variety and complexity' (pp. 165–6). And 'no matter how apparently routinised the job, people learn to use

their judgement and mediate between these rules and what actually happens' (p. 166). Grugulis here draws on the distinction between knowledge *work* (for example, work involving the application of high level concepts) and 'knowledgeability *in work*', a distinction developed by Thompson et al (2001) which, according to Grugulis, allows us to maintain 'a sense of proportion' (p. 167) when we acknowledge the skill involved in some service sector work. This may have it both ways: acknowledge high level skill, but define it as low level. Callaghan and Thompson (2002: 239, 248) define 'knowledgeability' in the context of call centre work as the ability to consciously manipulate emotions and personal characteristics to achieve good service. They also allow that such workers are active 'and skilled' emotion managers, although at the same time defining these skills as 'low level'. This seems to be equivocation. For Grugulis, the take-out point is that soft skills 'are not necessarily skilful' (p. 89). The discussion of emotion work and service sector skill thus suffers from at least three problems: first, it does not consider the variety of emotion work, second it does not consider the possible levels at which the soft skills may be exercised and third, it does not consider the ways in which emotion work is intertwined with other forms of work.

First, 'emotional labour', like 'knowledgeability', is an indiscriminately deployed conceptual category. Grugulis' discussion is all about how workers' emotions are commodified, and 'owned' by the organisation. Paradigmatic images of the emotional labourer are the call center worker, and Hochschild's flight attendants. As to the latter, Grugulis tells us that each detail of action and behaviour are 'as tightly prescribed as the shovelling done by Taylor's Schmidt' (p. 103, emphasis added). That there might be other forms of interactive service work gets only the briefest of mentions — carers, for example, are listed as among the deskilled service proletariat. The difference between a call centre worker fielding banking inquiries, and a nurse or carer performing the delicate management of a dying patient's family, herself and others (including a range of professionals), it seems, is not worthy of analytic note.

Second, Grugulis lampoons the suggestion that 'communicating the location of baked beans in a supermarket is the same as communicating the rules of cricket or abstract theories in mathematics' (p. 79). One agrees: the skills of communication exist at different levels. Developing a way to identify the different levels at which skill is exercised is crucial to resolving the issue of whether 'knowledgeable' work (for Thompson et al, the conscious control and manipulation of personal characteristics like emotional expression, which, in other contexts, may be called 'emotional intelligence') really *is* 'low' level. Indeed, the fact that it is *defined* as low level may be part of the problem — that many jobs emerging in the new service economy are making unacknowledged performance and skill demands. Many of these jobs are occupied by women. Thus one of the most pressing challenges for the developers of Australian training packages (who now have to 'embed' employability skills in these packages) is distinguishing the various levels of competence in, say, communication or teamwork, and so on. This project must needs draw on the idea of 'levels' of learning, and of achievement, from novice to expert, which is central to the

training literature (see Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986; Schuell 1990), but regrettably not addressed by Grugulis.

Third, emotion work is intertwined with other forms of work. Grugulis notes that in the 'style' labour market of Glasgow, Nickson et al (2001) identified how workers had to modulate, not only their appearance — hairstyle, grooming and so on — but also their moods. Control of emotion was thus interwoven with aesthetic labour — the labour of presentation and image management. Similarly, in call centres, 'smiling down the phone' entails a mix of aural and emotional aesthetics. But such work also may entail simultaneous control of knowledge, keyboard skills and the ability to navigate screens, all within time constraints and managerial *diktats* (Hampson and Junor 2005). The intertwining of diverse work processes and skills is sometimes referred to as 'articulation work' (Strauss et al 1985). Grugulis herself notes in passing, but does not explore, the ways in which 'soft skills' are 'intextricably intertwined' with technical skills (p. 76), for example the technical process of problem solving, anticipating work flow and so on, in the lean production workplaces studied by Shibata (2001).

Elsewhere this intertwining is labelled 'work process knowledge', or 'articulation work' (Strauss et al 1985; Boreham et al 2002). These literatures highlight a number of integrative, coordinative and awareness skills that may be absent from individualist approaches to skill, and may be part of 'collective competence'. They are the essential, but unrecognised 'dark matter' of the work organisation universe. Recognising these skills is important for equity, and to attract and retain people in jobs the quality of which are important (for example aged care) and destined to become increasingly so as the population ages. That these skills *are* there is implicitly acknowledged by employers, who, in Australia, have named them, albeit 'from the top down' as highly individualised and personally embodied 'employability skills'. As described above, these skills include a 'wish list' of desirable (from the point of view of the employer) personal attributes alongside more internationally accepted 'generic' skills. Moving beyond employer-defined notions of 'skill' will require developing effective conceptual equipment and skill recognition technologies.

v) *The Role of Unions in the Training System*

What involvement do unions have in the British training system? Regrettably, Grugulis does not address this question, which might be of vital importance both for Australian unions and for the Australian training system. The Rudd Government has inherited a number of the structural problems mentioned above, and a new one: how to re-integrate input from the unions into training policy and practice. The Howard government made a virtue of handing control over the training system to the employers — this has been deleterious, if the above analysis has any merit. The task in this respect for the Rudd government is how to achieve the right balance between representation of unions and employers — or, more directly, what is the appropriate role for unions in a revamped Australian training system?

Lloyd and Payne (2007) argue that inclusion of the British unions within the British training system has been one of the latter's strengths, and one of the

Blair labour government's most union-friendly initiatives. A 'Union Learning Fund', to support the role of unions in workplace learning, was created in 1998, and statutory backing and financial support has been given to Union Learning Representatives (ULRs). In 2006 a large website (www.unionlearn.org.uk) was established, and this gives considerable detail about the accomplishments of British unions in this arena. The main role of ULRs has been as an 'evangelist for skills', brokering training opportunities for disadvantaged groups, and others (Lloyd and Payne 2007: 65, *passim*). There has been debate about the extent to which unions have been able to transform an employer-driven agenda about skills to one which offers personal development, or even takes up transformative possibilities.

As Streeck (1992) has argued, the participation of unions can significantly improve national training systems, by providing employee representation in policing, at the workplace, the compliance of workplace training with nationally determined curricula, assessment protocols and quality standards. This amounts to, to build on the ACCI proposal above, a 'triple sign off'. On this view, workplace training would be 'signed off' by an assessor from the training system, and an employer and worker representative. This could help overcome the failures of assessment which have plagued the Australian training system for over 20 years, and which no institutional design has yet solved. Participation by unions — or potentially some alternative form of employee workplace representation — could be the missing link in the system. However, according to Lloyd and Payne (2007), the involvement of unions at the workplace in Britain does not seem to have reached its full potential — the 'social Europe' models across the English Channel have been resisted by the Government as 'sclerotic'. British unions have not achieved the 'triple sign off' status hinted at above, and thus could not contribute to the important mechanism to promote assessment validity hinted at above.

Conclusion

The new book by Grugulis makes the obvious point that intervention to boost the supply of skills risks leading to an oversupply of skills, or at least of qualifications, in the absence of other supportive policies — notably policies to encourage employers to emphasise high skill production strategies. This is a lesson worth underlining, which goes back to the industry policy agendas of the 1980s in Australia. Grugulis' explanation of the British training system resonates with the Australian system: a pattern of fairly extensive state intervention that fails because it pulls up short on *forthrightly* regulating training at the workplace. The tensions between the pressures of a market-based system, and the development of long term, quality skill assets, has not been appropriately addressed by policy makers. The result is ongoing problems, in particular with assessment and the quality of qualifications, endless institutional recycling and acronym reengineering.

Australian policy makers and others in the training 'industry' have been wrestling for some years with the changing nature of skill — and while this book offers a good summary of some of the literature in the area, it does not

engage effectively with certain key questions. It reproduces the ‘conventional wisdom’ in labour process circles about ‘soft skill’ — that somehow it is not ‘real’ skill. As Grugulis acknowledges, this is conceptually confusing. It is not very helpful to those charged with the task of embedding employability skills into training packages in Australia. In all, the book forcefully makes the case that new thinking is needed in the realm of skills. Regrettably, this book stops short of providing that new thinking.

Notes

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