A STUDY OF WORKPLACE PEDAGOGIES
THE ROLE OF THE WORKPLACE TRAINER IN BUSINESS ENVIRONMENTS

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A paper presented at the

Australian Association for Research in Education Conference

Adelaide, 1st December 1998

Introduction

One of the most significant outcomes of the training reforms that have taken place over the past decade has been the (re)claiming of the workplace as a legitimate learning environment. Commonwealth government reform has gradually been shifting the balance from a supply to a demand driven system of vocational education and training (VET). Many workers in a wide cross section of enterprises are increasingly being asked to be responsible for facilitating the learning of their colleagues. Since the mid-1990s research activity in Australia has contributed to a growing body of literature on learning in the workplace. Yet there is precious little relating to the role of trainers, particularly the link with quality (Simons and Harris 1997: 6). In particular, there has been little attention paid to the conceptualisation of the role of trainer as it might apply in an enterprise setting or how this role might vary, and the degree to which training is formalised, in differently sized enterprises. This paper explores some preliminary ideas arising out of research the authors have been undertaking on how these people go about their twin tasks of facilitating learning and working in their enterprises.

The paper is set in the context of the most recent VET policy initiative - the fostering of a "training culture" in industry, especially small business. This theme was the title of ANTA's annual conference this year and quite obviously preoccupies the hearts and minds of those in positions of governmental responsibility. The paper questions the generally accepted notions of "workplace trainer" as enshrined in the Workplace Trainer Competency Standards, as embodied in the discourse of national talkfests of 'good' training practice, and as traditionally practised in large enterprises with dedicated human resource departments. If the workplace trainer is indeed the key player in the training culture game, then this role is well worth examining. Research on this role will count, as it will contribute to our understanding of significant issues relating to the extent to which and the ways in which such a policy as developing a "training culture" (or learning culture, as we would prefer it to be labelled) can be effectively implemented.

The first part of the paper sets the context for our study by exploring the key beliefs that have driven the government's approach to developing training policies, and how employers have responded to these policies. The second part examines the role of the "workplace trainer".The third and final part of the paper looks at examples of learning in the workplace from the current research project and suggests how this role might be reconceptualised to embrace ideas about facilitating learning which are derived from how enterprises do business.

Training in enterprises

The shift from a supply to demand driven VET system is continuing apace. This shift can be traced to three core beliefs (Hawke 1998):

- the system of VET that existed prior to the mid 1980s was not capable of delivering the type of training needed to create a flexible, skilled workforce which could give Australia a competitive advantage in an increasingly globalised economy;
- the nature of the competence required by the workforce to drive Australia's economic development could best be developed in learning environments where real world activities could be undertaken; and
- the cost of increasing the skill level of the Australian workforce to meet these demands was going to be high. In order to achieve the twin policy goals of a more highly skilled workforce whilst containing costs associated with VET, ways needed to be found to encourage enterprises to invest in training in the workplace that would lead to formal qualifications.

These beliefs provide the foundation for reforms which have promoted the de-institutionalisation of training, particularly at the lower levels of the Australian Qualifications Framework and the increasing importance of the role of the workplace trainer. In short, the training reforms have placed great emphasis on workplaces and the personnel in them to provide relevant, contextualised job-specific learning opportunities in a manner that will contribute to the growing pool of qualified workers in a cost effective manner. The critical issue is to what extent workplaces are able to meet this challenge.

To date, the response of enterprises to these reforms has been varied. Statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics reveal that almost all large enterprises (those with more than 100 employees) provide training to their employees (Robinson 1998:2). Similarly a large proportion of medium to small enterprises also provide training. Small business enterprises, in contrast, supply training in only about 50% of cases. Disaggregation of statistics on training activity in small enterprises reveals some further insights:

- only 45% of micro businesses (enterprises that employ less than 5 people) have been found to be involved in training (Robinson 1998:2)
- about one quarter of small businesses are involved in training apprentices, trainees or publicly funded management development programs (NCVER 1998:5)
- just under 45% of all non-agricultural small businesses do not have any employees - the benefits of training in these cases are often limited to the sole proprietor (NCVER 1998:5)

Today's business environments are characterised by a number of factors such as increased competition and rapid technological change which, theoretically, should act to motivate a greater investment in training. What researchers have noted, however, is a decreasing expenditure in training. Between 1993 and 1996 employers' expenditure on training (as a percentage of gross wages and salaries) fell (Misson 1998:3). It should be noted however

that when small businesses do invest in training they spend substantially more. Field (1997:7) comments that this might because

- small businesses, unlike large ones, are much more reliant on training and skills, and
- what small businesses claim as training may be due to "accountants who are good at claiming lots of expenses under the 'training' heading".

The decision to become involved in the business of training is a complex one and one of only a number of responses that an enterprise could make in order to meet its needs for skilled labour. Billett and Cooper (1997) identified a number of different types of investment that enterprises could make in relation to training. Enterprises could:

- purchase skilled labour from the marketplace and invest in informal on-job training;
- employ apprentices or trainees and make a contribution in terms of wages and support for off-job learning and the provision of on-job training;
- provide specialist training to develop workforce skills by sending employees to training programs provided externally to the enterprise or internally by a consultant; and/or
- provide in-house training via the use of in-house Human Resource experts and trainers.

A partial explanation of how training is viewed by enterprises and what might encourage an investment of training is provided by human capital theory (OTFE 1998). Within this theory training is viewed as an investment. Training will take place when the return on the investment justifies the costs associated with providing training. Hence the level of training provided by an enterprise depends upon factors which affect the costs and benefits of training.

Human capital theory can help also to unravel the type of training in which enterprises are likely to invest. Enterprises are more likely to invest in training that will make the employee more valuable to that enterprise. In other words, enterprise specific skills are valued more highly that generic skills which can make an employee more vulnerable to poaching. In some ways this last point is in direct conflict with some of the current VET reforms which emphasise portability and the value of training to individuals. These characteristics can be seen to be in direct competition with employers' interests.

There has been extensive research on the barriers and factors that affect enterprises' approaches to investing in training. There has been particular attention paid to small businesses which have been a focus of training policy in recent years (Gibb1997: 17). The most significant factors noted in the literature are:

(a) size of enterprise

The size of the enterprise can result in quite different levels of investment in training. Larger enterprises, not surprisingly, tend to make a larger investment in training that smaller enterprises. This lower level of investment in formal training in small enterprises can be attributed to a number of factors including:

- the greater concentration of jobs with lower skill requirements in the small business sector (Baker and Wooden 1995);
- a greater tendency for small business to focus on short term goals (Robertson and Stuart (1996);
- the routine nature of a large proportion of the work which does not require high levels of skills or the need for up-skilling or multi-skilling (Field 1997);

- an over-reliance on the external labour market to provide skilled labour requirements (Baker and Wooden 1995);
- some small businesses compete on the basis of low cost and flexibility rather than customer service and quality. This has implications for the types of skilled labour employed by the business (Field 1997);
- managers/owners are not able to determine training needs or outcomes (Catts 1996) or provide on-job supervision (Robertson and Stuart 1996);
- approaches to recruitment which show a preference for already skilled, mature workers rather than unskilled younger people (Field 1997);
- the part-time and non-permanent nature of employment in small business and the high numbers of women who have difficulty attending structured training (Field 1997);
- a lack of experience with training which otherwise may have exposed business owners to the benefits of training;
- the perception of small business that the formal training system is not able to provide relevant, specific and immediately applicable training in a cost effective and timely manner (Coopers and Lybrand 1994, Karpin Report 1995); and
- the lack of incentive for workers to undertake training. In many small enterprises the internal labour market is either very limited or non-existent. There is little opportunity for career advancement or enhanced job prospects (Cabalu *et al.* 1996).

Coopers and Lybrand (1994) noted that the tendency for small business to train employees increased as the number of employees and the annual turn over of the business increased. They also highlighted the fact that training was often not seen by employers as a solution to their problems. They tended to label training as "too theoretical" and "not immediately applicable" and hence not worth the investment.

(b) lack of understanding of formal VET provision

Guthrie and Barnett (1996) noted the lack of understanding within enterprises about formal training and how courses are accredited. Misko (1996) investigating work based training in a range of enterprises, identified that few used government incentives for a range of reasons including:

- a lack of awareness of the incentives available,
- the bureaucratic and inflexible administrative processes needed to obtain the incentives and
- the perception that the incentives did not really take into account the needs of enterprises.

(c) specialisation

Those enterprises whose focus coincides with an area of VET provision (for example, child care) are more likely to utilise the public system and make a lower contribution to the skill development of their employees. Small businesses whose focus lies outside the mainstream VET providers are more likely to use alternative means to train their employees such as the use of informal and unstructured approaches to training (Billett and Cooper 1997: 12)

(d) location

The location of enterprises will also influence the decision to invest in training. Difficulties in recruiting trained workers to rural and remote regions may make it necessary for employers

to train existing workers. Conversely, costs associated with travel and time away from the business may affect decisions to invest in formal training programs away from the work site.

Overall, the literature on investment in training suggests that the larger the enterprise the more likely training is to occur. Smaller enterprises are more likely to use the labour market to meet their skill requirements rather than invest in training. It is also important to note that the most common form of training reported by enterprises is informal, on-the-job and unstructured. This approach to training is the most difficult to quantify and measure and, for this reason, is often under-valued. It is, however, growing in importance and degree. It is watered within the current learning climate that promotes notions of the learning organisation (Senge 1992) and continuous improvement in enhancing quality and competitive edge in the global marketplace, and fertilised within the current business climate of economic rationalism that demands cost-cutting and efficiency.

The workplace as a learning environment

Smith (1997) examined some of the "myths" associated with training in small enterprises and concluded that they are often very committed to training, but they rely on different *types* of training from those which have been promoted in VET policies and by VET providers. In contrast with large enterprises, training in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) tends to be informal, firm-specific, undertaken on-the-job and related to day-to-day operations (Seagreaves and Osborne 1997:47). Fundamentally, it is learning *through* work, where learning is integrated into doing the job. This type of learning contrasts sharply with learning *for* work, which is usually associated with vocational training that can occur at any number of sites (for example, a TAFE institute), and learning *at* work, which is often referred to as learning which is undertaken within an enterprise but removed from the worksite (that is, training provided off-job but in-house by the training department or an external consultant) (Seagreaves and Osborne 1997).

The learning environment that exists in an enterprise, particularly a SME, provides a context where learning is embedded in or co-terminus with work. Observation reveals one set of behaviours. Yet this hides two streams of activity - one associated with getting the job done, the other with learning (Scribner and Sachs 1990). This form of learning is distinctive because it

- is task focused;
- occurs in a social context where status differences can exist between workers and there are often clear demarcation lines between groups of workers (for example, supervisors or the business owner and other team members/employees);
- often grows out of an experience such as a problem, crisis or novel event;
- occurs in an environment where people receive remuneration for their work; and
- entails different cognitive processes from those used in an off-site environment.

(Retalick, 1993, Billet, 1994, 1996)

In small or micro businesses (which employ less that five persons) learning is very often facilitated on a one-to-one basis. The "training" is frequently unplanned, unscheduled, unrehearsed and spontaneous, often in response to a crisis or problem, and therefore often intuitive (Vallance 1997:120). The character of this training is shaped by the absence of dedicated training staff, and often undertaken by the person(s) nearest the crisis who usually has little or no training expertise (Hawke 1998). Smith (1997) notes that learning often

occurs in informal and "non-traditional" ways and is very dependent on time and the operating context in which the enterprise finds itself.

In many respects learning in the workplace is quite rigorously structured. It is framed by the features and structures of the work and the work practices in which the learning is embedded (Onstenk 1995). Scribner and Sachs (1990) describe the learning process as one of "assimilation", where the learner /worker is gradually brought into on-going work practices and "normal events" of the workplace in a manner that ensures that the job gets done. The learning might require some re-organisation of work practices. It is often underpinned by a particular flow of communication and can sometimes be group rather than individually focused. Group members "teach" each other and integrate their skills and knowledge in order to enhance the collective competence of the enterprise (Sefton, Waterhouse and Deakin 1994; Sorhan 1993; Lyons 1989). It can also involve 'unlearning' previously held practices and beliefs and acknowledging tacit assumptions and beliefs that shape approaches to tasks and issues (Marsick 1987; Marsick and Watkins 1990; Harris *et al.* 1998). Customs, habits, attitudes, the way individuals respond to mistakes and problems, the degree to which questioning and time for explanations are tolerated - all these frame the learning and shape how the person(s) designated as "trainer" might approach the task of helping workers learn their jobs.

The "workplace trainer"

As noted above, the learning environment and learning processes within an enterprise provide a powerful framework which shapes how a person who helps others learn their job might operate. Only in some instances is this person able to view their role as a learning facilitator; and only rarely will they have formalised knowledge and skills to enhance their performance in this role.

Governments and large businesses have tended to believe that this issue will be addressed by workplace train the trainer courses. One of the first sets of competency standards to be developed in the early days of training reform was for workplace trainers (CSB-Assessor and Workplace Trainers 1994). The purpose underpinning the development of these standards was essentially practical, focusing on assisting those responsible for hiring and training workplace trainers (Garrick and Mc Donald 1992). These standards received considerable official support with the process underpinning their development involving "five hundred organisations, government bodies, ITABs, industry trainers, teachers and private individuals" (CSB - Workplace Trainers cited in Peak 1992). Critical research underpinning these standards was, however, very limited (Garrick and McDonald 1992: 176).

These standards have been based upon assumptions about training and the training role which are still yet to be seriously questioned. The standards are underpinned by a "skills deficit" notion of training which is more reminiscent of institutionalised approaches to skill formation (Garrick and McDonald 1992: 176 - 177). They appear to lack any real links with emerging ideas such as the learning organisation (Senge 1992, Bawden 1991) or the body of knowledge which emphasises learning embedded in daily work practices and occurring in an informal or incidental manner (Marsick, 1987; Marsick and Watkins 1990; Harris *et al*. 1998).

A recently conducted review of the competency standards for workplace trainers and assessors concludes with "concerns about the uptake of the standards" (Griffin *et al*. 1998:11) and reveals some issues of particular interest (Gillis *et al*. 1998) including:

- data suggesting that the national standards are largely being ignored in the development and delivery of training for workplace trainers and assessors; and

- serious doubts about the levels of awareness and use of the standards in the assessment of competency for the training of workplace trainers and assessors. In many instances, providers of training for assessors and trainers appear to use pre-packaged materials as a basis for training programs with little or no reference to the standards.

The authors conclude:

> *The users' endorsement of the existing standards and the widespread implementation of training programs based on alternative curricula and competencies, together with a worrying level of apathy with respect to the training and assessment competency standards, [were] noted...*

Apart from methodological issues which might be raised in relation to this study, it is perhaps feasible to conclude that one factor contributing to the apparent non-use of these standards (and in particular the category one standards) might be their lack of relevance to persons who in the course of their work are asked to help colleagues learn. In many respects the standards reflect more of an attempt to legitimise moving the work of a trainer or teacher from an off-site environment such as a TAFE institute to the workplace, than an attempt to capture the complexity of encouraging and supporting learning in a real work environment.

A recent study examining the role of workers as supporters of apprentices' learning in the construction industry lends some weight to this assertion (Harris et al 1998.). This study found that the apprentices desired different skills from their workplace trainers than they were able or willing, in most cases, to provide. The workplace trainer, often a small business operator (who might fit the description contained in the category one workplace trainer standards), facilitated the learning of the apprentices in a manner which was far removed from that which might be inferred from these standards. The apprentices, reflecting on their experiences of learning, recommended that training be offered to their workplace mentors and that this training should enable them to learn a wide range of skills including communication and conflict resolution. They also needed to develop competencies which would enable them to deal sensitively and productively with contingencies and difficulties (Harris *et al.* 1998:201).

From "workplace trainer" to "workplace guide"

We claimed at the beginning that our research is beginning to challenge accepted notions of "workplace trainer". Our research evidence and other literature suggest the need to think differently about the role of the person who, in a workplace setting, assumes the task of supporting colleagues in learning their jobs. A major stumbling block is the language - what *is*the most appropriate and accurate descriptor for such a person? Available terms tend to be saddled with preconceptions. A term such as *"trainer"* does not accurately describe this role. Moreover, it carries the connotation of a more formalised function that is not seen by many small business operators as useful or relevant to their operations (Field 1997).

People who choose or are asked to work with a newer or less experienced worker may not necessarily alter their pattern of work in any significantly visible manner. But they none-the-less undertake the task of guidance the learning of others using direct skills such as modelling, coaching, scaffolding and fading (Billett 1996a). Indirect guidance could also be used to facilitate learning including the provision of opportunity for less experienced workers/trainees to observe other workers, and to listen and talk with them (Harris *et al.* 1998).

In some respects this role appears to share some similarities with the term *"mentor"*. Mentoring is a process characterised by facilitated learning undertaken when a more experienced person works with a less experienced co-worker to provide support, advice, skill development and guidance (Wallis 1997; Coombs 1997). The relationship is structured in 'common territory' (in this case, the work environment) and is subject to change as that territory is shaped by the contingencies of work.

A number of authors have identified groups of behavioural functions that characterise the mentoring relationship (Cohen 1995, Tovey 1997). Within a workplace learning setting these include:

- building relationships which lay the foundation for the exchanges that will accompany the learning/work stream;
- sharing information and demonstrating skills which both facilitate the workers' goals and aspirations and meet the needs of the business;
- facilitating and fostering workers' self reflection and thinking about the role within the business, their interests, abilities and beliefs;
- challenging workers' actions, beliefs and decisions;
- modelling self disclosure and acting as a role model;
- demonstrating and fostering vision and innovation.

Within these functions, skills such as those identified by Billett (1996a) might be evident, underpinned by micro skills such as explaining, questioning, guidance, linking, cueing, reflecting, correcting (Tovey 1997). Insights from examining apprentices' learning on-the-job also suggest that the workplace guide may also alter the "anatomy" of work to emphasis components of a job or task in order to help the learner grasp its component parts and their inter-relatedness (Harris *et al*. 1998; Scribner and Sachs 1990).

From our research and the literature, it is possible to hypothesise an alternative way of conceptualising the role of the "workplace trainer", particularly for those working in environments which value forms of learning and skill development that are perhaps less formal and more intertwined with the everyday work of an enterprise. A worker in this context could be asked to work alongside another worker or workers - and rather than acting as a trainer, this person acts as a *workplace guide*. This role, rather than being built around competence in instructing trainees, evaluating training and providing information, might be built on a range of behaviours that take as their starting point the coterminous nature of learning and the task of building a successful and profitable business. Workplace guides may, for example, have competencies in areas such as managing the work environment including the flow and complexity of the work, building and maintaining relationships to facilitate increasing productivity of workers, assimilating workers into the work practices and tasks of the enterprise and facilitating the integration of workers' knowledge and skills to build the competence of the work team/enterprise. This is not to say that the aforementioned competencies of instructing, providing information and evaluating training are not part of the role of the workplace trainer. The key issue is *the extent* to which these competencies are reflective of the behaviours required of a person working as a workplace guide. The workplace guide's observed behaviours combine two sets of activities - those shaped by their role as a co-worker / business owner-manager and those which pertain to their responsibilities for ensuring the competence of other employees.

The evidence that is emerging from our current research suggests that 'workplace guides', particularly in small enterprises, are developing different ways of operating from the traditional on-the-job trainer model. What seems to be happening is not only demand driven and task focused, but is characterised by what might be called "just in time" learning. The idea that workers need training that results in a set of pre-determined competencies, which

once acquired fits them for the job, has given way to a continuous learning approach where skills are learned as and when required and then updated as necessary.

Skills that are not immediately required are not taught. In the IT industry examples we have observed, this is particularly true. For example, today's software packages are so comprehensive that few users require knowledge of and facility with all the features. IT workers therefore learn just the features required for the job in hand. Learning features that might be useful for the next job is counter productive. By the time a new job with the need for new features presents itself, there could well be a new software program.

The workplace guide can be found in a variety of settings. Often it is one-on-one and undertaken by peers. Sometimes it is in groups in which co-workers share information and skills. These groups can be formal meetings such as Monday morning planning meetings convened by 'the boss', or *ad hoc* meetings to solve a job related problem. In most small businesses, work is invariably being done to a deadline so all workers have a vested interest in co-workers being 'up to speed' in the skills necessary to complete the task on time.

In many real estate companies, each agent is in competition with his/her colleagues as remuneration is tied to commission. This means the model of the workplace guide tends to be less collegiate than in IT. Skill sharing is less attractive. The owner, however, has a vested interest in all the agents having good work skills, so he/she often acts as the workplace guide. Learning often takes place at weekly business meetings where each agent's portfolio is discussed. The owner uses this meeting to impart knowledge and, more importantly, instil the company ethos. The skills learned on these occasions are those of compliant practice in work tasks and keeping personal morale high in a tough environment.

In the construction industry, as might be expected, one finds on-the-job training of the more traditional type still very evident. However, even here there seems to be an interesting shift, especially in the small enterprises. The small builder often works on very tight margins so efficiency is most important. Sub-contractors are frequently very specialised, making the range of skills narrow, but the level of skill required very critical. The guide in this situation not only ensures that the work is done correctly and efficiently, he/she imparts a number of other important skills. These are the skills of co-operation, initiative, anticipation and being a willing team member. The learner not only learns the skills, but also the importance of a rhythm of work that allows the job to flow. It is sometimes the speed and efficiency resulting from this well rehearsed work flow which makes the difference between a profit or a loss - between having a job or being out of work.

The shifts in the way workers learn on the job may be summarised as follows.

On the job training	Workplace guidance
Competency standard driven	Demand driven
Training to an objective/learning outcome	Learning for skill level required for job in hand
Training to a syllabus designed to cover all	Learning skills 'just in time' with no 'end

skills likely to be encountered in the future over a set time ending in a *formal* credential	point' envisaged.
Training to set standards that are fixed	Learning beyond standards to a level of 'flexibility' and adaptability
Training in a 'novice trainee' environment with time set aside specifically for training	Learning as a normal integrated part of the work day

Workplace guidance, then is a coming together of working and learning in an almost seamless way. Training in small business is frequently a response to immediate skill needs in a rapidly changing environment when technological and economic imperatives do not remain static.

Efforts to understand how learning takes place in enterprises continue to increase. It has become apparent that most enterprises of varying sizes value learning. The manner in which people carry out their role of fostering learning varies widely. The workplace trainer standards represent one framework for understanding how this role can be conceptualised. We hope that our study, which is exploring new ways of framing how we might think about the role of the workplace trainer, will further the goal of building workplace training/learning cultures in enterprises.

In this way **our research will count** as it contributes to a body of knowledge about how a training/learning culture might be fostered, and thereby builds upon the knowledge base to be drawn on by educational policy-makers. We are mindful, however, of the conclusion of Selby-Smith *et al*. (1998: 21) in their recent study on *The impact of research on VET decision-making*:

> *The research enterprise is accumulative. Much research does not stand on its own as a piece of work but adds to that which existed before. This accumulating body of knowledge contributes in decision-making to the creation of a climate of opinion and the development of a set of ideas, so that at any given time certain ideas, approaches or ways of thinking are in 'good currency', whilst others are not or are no longer. Over time, research's main contribution may be to the 'big ideas'. A number of the 'big ideas' preoccupying senior VET decision-makers in recent years are grounded in research.*

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