Competing perspectives on workplace learning and the learning organisation

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1. Introduction

Commentaries upon the need for learning organisations (LOs) are often decontextualised accounts of how organisations should operate. They are often written as if they represent a single template of what organisations need to become. There seems little evidence in such accounts of critical reflexivity, so here we will highlight competing perspectives on almost all aspects of workplace learning and learning organisations, as applied to the UK context. The intention is consonant with the view that human agency is important and that we need to build multiple visions of what might be, rather than accepting a single view of the shape of work in future.

2. Determinism or strategic choice in relation to forms of workplace organisation

A key question on the future of learning in organisations is whether you believe that the future patterns of learning and workplace organisation are pre-determined. The overview of international thinking and research on workplace learning undertaken by the Tavistock Institute for the IPD (Sommerlad and Stern, 1998) emphasises the complexity of issues of workplace learning. They "take issue with the largely deterministic stance that pervades much of the literature. Work organisation and skills are not, as they assert, determined in a linear fashion by particular technology or market conditions. Options are available and strategic choices can be made" (Sommerlad and Stern, 1998, p. 14).

The rhetoric of the learning organisation is predicated upon assumptions about changes in the nature of work and the demand for skills, probably as outlined in the European Commission's green paper on workplace organisation (European Commission, 1997) or the OECD's vision of the high performance workplace' (OECD, 1996; OECD/Government of Canada, 1997). Within this paradigm, higher skills are only a means to an end. If they are to improve economic performance they have to change the way we work and alter the way organisations are structured and choose to compete. Management gurus and policy advisors have insisted that higher levels of skill within the workforce are an essential prerequisite for the adoption of a new model of high skills, high performance mode of working within learning organisations. Instead of mass producing a narrow range of highly standardised goods and services, firms will wish to customise their products to meet the demands of individual consumers. Moreover, competition will increasingly be on the basis of quality, with higher value added goods and services representing the only way in which the developed world can cope with competition from lower wage economies (Drucker, 1990).

This new model has a number of implications for skills and work organisation, with flatter, non-hierarchical, often networked forms of organisation becoming more widespread. Workers will need to work more autonomously, monitor their own output, adapt to change, solve problems, take initiative, and think creatively in order to perform more effectively. As a consequence, workers will not only have to be more highly skilled, they will also have to have the intellectual resources to engage in lifelong learning in order to meet the ever-changing needs of more dynamic product and labour markets. Relations between managers and their staff will be based on high

levels of trust, communication and involvement will be relatively intensive, and team working will be the norm (Hayes, 1992). Guile and Fonda (1998) in a study of the work organisation, performance management and skill usage of a group of leading edge UK organisations concluded that the strategic imperative for management is to "develop new modes of behaviour amongst employees that emphasise collaboration, self management and accepting responsibility for outcomes; create an organisational environment that enables employees to take initiative, to co-operate and to learn" (Guile and Fonda, 1998, p. 9).

One consequence of such thinking is that the government's main role in speeding the transition towards the adoption of this new paradigm is to put in place reforms within the education and training system that will increase the supply of skills. What VET research can tell us about widely this model has been adopted is discussed in later sections. What follows here is an overview that reflects research findings from those outside the field of VET who specialise in the study of product market and competitive strategies, and workplace organisation and employee relations systems. Generally those who specialise in the study of product market and competitive strategies, and industrial relations and people management systems, tend to paint a less optimistic picture than either policy makers or some who specialise in vocational education and training.

As Regini (1995) suggests the model of a high skills/high value added strategy is simply one of a number of viable models available to European firms and nation states. There are other, perhaps equally attractive routes to competitive advantage from which firms can choose, although this is an unwelcome message for policy makers. Far from a single, simple, universalistic movement towards higher value added and higher quality goods and services throughout the developed world, different companies, sectors and even countries are following a range of divergent trajectories. These alternatives include seeking protected markets, growth through take-over, seeking monopoly power, cost-cutting and new forms of Fordism.

Indeed recent events underline the continuing, perhaps growing, importance that is attached to merger and acquisition as a prime source of competitive advantage. Sheer size and associated market dominance appears to hold considerable attractions to senior managers in sectors as diverse as pharmaceuticals, aerospace, car manufacturing, and banking. Also neo-Fordism remains a powerful model of competitive advantage within the UK economy, especially within the service sector. In major UK retail chains, retail banks, and insurance companies managements compete to achieve the lowest possible cost base, seeing it as the key to achieving profitability from delivering a narrow range of standardised goods and services in markets which are primarily driven by price (Keep and Mayhew, 1998).

So a high skills route to competitive advantage may be a minority choice, as many UK firms rely upon cost based competitive advantage and produce relatively low spec goods and services (Doyle, Saunders and Wong, 1992; Williams et al, 1990). Marginson (1994) reports that British-owned multi-nationals tend to be located in relatively low technology industries, and Ackroyd and Procter (1998), in their overview of large British manufacturing firms, suggest that the UK's presence in the high value added manufacture of capital goods is weak and dwindling. They conclude that:

> "British arrangements for manufacture at plant level do not depend on high levels of skill or high levels of investment…output is achieved in part by some reorganization of machinery, but more significantly by a combination of a heavy dependency on the flexible use of relatively unskilled labour and a willingness to utilize external sources of production. The basic arrangement for manufacture is the use of standard technology by teams of self-regulated and formally-unskilled workers"
> (Ackroyd and Procter, 1998, p. 171).

British managers are less likely to see a skilled workforce as a source of competitive advantage than their French and German counterparts (Coopers and Lybrand, 1995). Furthermore, the UK's record on investment in R&D also hardly suggests the kind of product development strategies that would demand high skill levels across the economy. In 1996 just nine companies (in pharmaceuticals, aerospace and chemicals) accounted for one third of all UK private sector R&D (Department of Trade and Industry, 1997: 2), and the government judged UK firms' investment record in R&D to be at world class levels only in the pharmaceuticals sector (*The Guardian*, 26 June 1997).

Keep and Mayhew (1998) argue that there may be good reasons why many UK firms continue to seek advantage through offering low spec, low price goods and services. One very powerful factor is the structure of domestic demand in the UK. The inequality of income distribution across the UK population means that there is a large proportion of the population who have little choice but to buy on the basis of price rather than quality. The more egalitarian income distribution found in Germany and the Scandinavian countries make it far easier for producers catering for the domestic market to envisage and embrace high value added strategies and competition that centres around quality rather than price. There is a mass market for such goods and services, whereas in the UK the structure of income distribution and demand means that quality is often confined to a niche market.

The picture of competitive and product market strategy outlined above suggests that the revolutionary transformations being forecast may be some way off in many UK sectors and firms. The story on workplace organisation, the structuring of productive processes and people management systems reinforces this message and suggests that for many workers, perhaps the majority, the high performance workplace is a distant prospect. There has been a general assumption that "the new forms of work organisation supposedly emerging are inevitable and universal in their application" (Industrial Relations Research Unit, 1997, p. 6). Unfortunately, this is not the case, rather "these new forms of work organisation are very much a minority movement" (IRRU, 1997, p. 6).

Part of the cause of this misunderstanding of the trajectory of workplace change is a tendency on the part of commentators to generalise from the particular work organisation and management styles found in leading edge manufacturing plants and/or the IT sector (software houses, Silicon Valley). They assume that such management styles and structures will be applicable in very different settings and within the context of competitive and product market strategies that are still wedded

to Fordism. Far from being the inevitable destiny of all organisations, the high skill, high participation, high performance workplace model may actually only be relevant within a limited sub-set of organisations, particularly when set within the wider context of the Anglo-Saxon variant of capitalism. Also it is difficult, in the UK context, to establish and maintain the kinds of high trust, high participation employee relations systems, that Streeck (1992, 1997) and Millward (1994) argue are another essential element of high skill productive strategies.

It can be argued that the above commentary under-estimates the halting, but none the less real progress towards the high performance model to which policy makers aspire. This point has some merit. The picture that emerges from the research is at best partial and it is extremely hard to disentangle the rhetoric with which managements clothe their competitive aspirations from the reality of what they actually choose to do. Everyone, or nearly everyone, now talks the language of quality (Keep and Mayhew, 1998). Overall though, the research in this area tends to confirm that the high performance workplace looks set to remain the experience of the minority of the UK workforce for the foreseeable future.

3. Competing perspectives from researchers in social science and business schools

If there is scope for strategic choice in forms of workplace organisation and patterns of learning in organisations, then can research inform that debate? The answer is 'yes', but there are a multiplicity of views from researchers too. Indeed, one of the distinctive features of recent VET research is its fragmentation, often along disciplinary fault lines. While educationists and others have focused on workplace learning, researchers located within management disciplines and business schools in a group of three broadly inter-linked concepts. These focus upon the effects upon organisational performance of the knowledge worker; knowledge management; and the learning organisation. Unfortunately, the crossover between these different bodies of research has been limited, and few of those active in these three fields appear aware of the wealth of research on workplace learning and skill acquisition developed by those within more long-established areas of VET research.

Some attempts, however, have been made to bridge the gap through consideration of the nature of work-related knowledge. Work-related knowledge develops and is applied within particular communities of practice, whose members develop ideas about how knowledge should be acquired, applied and shared (Attwell et al, 1997). Recently ideas about the application of tacit knowledge in particular social contexts have been developed further in considering moves to create 'knowledge-creating companies' (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). The model is based on the assumption that knowledge in organisations, especially in the most innovative enterprises, is created through the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge, continuously 'converting' one into the other one. In this perspective, organisational knowledge creation is a spiral process, starting at the individual level and moving up through expanding 'communities of interaction', that crosses sectional, departmental, divisional, and organisational boundaries in the organisation (Attwell et al, 1997).

4. Competing perspectives on the nature of learning organisations

The literature on the concept of the learning organisation has emerged almost entirely from within schools of business and management, and has been driven chiefly by those with an interest in organisational development. Senge (1990) defines a learning organisation as one "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together" (p.4). Unfortunately, in common with many other concepts that emerge from the management disciplines, the literature on the learning organisation suffers from a surfeit of prescription, definitional argument and model building, backed by a relatively small and tenuous body of analysis of the concept as it exists within real life organisations. The learning organisation is presented as either an idealised model (Jones and Hendry, 1992; 1994) where capitalist organisations are transformed into ethical communities, or as a toolkit of techniques, which if applied correctly by managers, will transform organisational performance and competitiveness (Pedlar et al, 1991).

There may be value therefore in problematising further the notion of the learning organisation. There are two possible drawbacks with focusing attention on learning organisations. The first relates to those organisations that style themselves learning organisations: how far is this another manifestation of a unitarist framework in which dominant values are represented as shared? The second is whether the emphasis upon companies as learning organisations serves to obscure the nature of experience of work in most companies.

On the first theme, Coopey (1994) highlights how the apolitical, unitarist framework underpinning ideas of a learning organisation can obscure the extent of political activity taking place within organisations in practice. The unitarist ideology is predicated upon rational activity in pursuit of managerial aims, within a climate of high trust, co-operation, shared goals and work being perceived as a central life interest for all.

On the second theme, the rhetoric of learning organisations is often coupled with changes to how individual careers are represented: Bridges (1995) and Handy (1989) argue that individuals will have ‘portfolio’ careers, where they need to participate in appropriate networks and develop their own career management skills. ‘Classic’ organisational career opportunities in large organisations have been substantially scaled back, but there is a need to challenge the implicit assumption that career choice, development and management was in the past a technically rational process. Such rational career development only ever applied to the minority of the population with stable ‘careers’.

In practice, ‘portfolio careers’ and ‘learning organisations’ will both remain on the margins of the lived experience of most people in the labour market. The immediate and medium-term outlook is for an increasing bifurcation in the skills required (and rewards offered) in the labour market (Lindley and Wilson, 1996). This means that we need to be aware of the ‘gap’ between the rhetoric and reality of ‘learning organisations’, and recognise that undue emphasis upon developments within learning organisations could misdirect attention away from a slower, less glamorous but

possibly more profound change caused by the increasing bifurcation of opportunities and rewards in the labour market. The implications of this for VET research is that attention perhaps needs to be focused upon how to get organisational commitment to facilitating learning opportunities for individuals throughout supply chains. That is, a key question is how can 'learning organisations' engage with those outside the organisation to facilitate wider learning communities.

Interestingly, Scarbrough et al (1999) note, in common with many other concepts within managerial literature, the half-life of the concept may be very limited. By examining specialist literature search databases, Scarbrough et al (1999) show that interest in the learning organisation appears to have waned since the mid-1990s, while interest in the 'next big thing' - knowledge management - has been rising sharply.

5. Competing perspectives about knowledge management

Management thinking on knowledge management first developed in the USA, and the bulk of the literature in the field reflects this genesis. Nevertheless, researchers in the UK have been swift to pick up on this new trend and to pursue it enthusiastically (Gibbons et al, 1994; Starbuck, 1992). Whereas the learning organisation grew out of organisational development, knowledge management was developed by information systems specialists (Scarbrough et al, 1999 and Scarbrough and Swan, 1999), and has been enthusiastically adopted by management gurus. Knowledge management can be defined as the acquisition, sharing and use of knowledge within organisations, including learning processes and management information systems. As Scarbrough (1998) comments:

> "The emerging field of knowledge management seems to reflect a constellation of changes in the business environment: long-run shifts in advanced industrial economies; the rise of occupations based on the creation and use of knowledge; the convergence of information and communication technologies; theoretical developments that emphasise the importance of unique and inimitable assets such as tacit knowledge; a new wave approach to packaging and promoting consultancy services in the wake of Business Process Reengineering.
>
> Knowledge Management is less a unified discipline or set of techniques than a way of making sense of a diverse range of practices … [including}…at least four different types of knowledge management: valuing knowledge; exploiting intellectual capital; capturing project-based learning; managing knowledge workers"
> (Scarbrough, 1998, p. 4).

Knowledge management is an attempt to treat skills and knowledge as a form of property that needs to be integrated into the managerial monitoring and control systems of modern organisations. However, as Scarbrough et al (1999) point out the knowledge management literature contains a number of significant blindspots and weaknesses. One is the lack of attention paid to people management issues, including training and development. For most of those interested in knowledge management, the system by which knowledge is managed is what is important. People are merely a

subject or throughput within such a system. A second problem area is the absence of attention paid to the interface between the organisation and its efforts to develop and capture knowledge and the wider VET system and labour market.

There is also perhaps a sense in which a focus upon 'knowledge management' itself represents an attempt at social control, decoupling knowledge acquisition from its traditional humanist and developmental roots. Knowledge development and application, from a liberal perspective, was intimately bound up with the actions and lived experience of individuals. Knowledge was to be connected to and transformed by experience in a continuing process of revising and deepening understanding. Indeed, from this perspective, that knowledge management depended upon the continuing development and growth of individuals was not perceived as a problem, rather it was regarded as an essential to the human condition: for example, Dewey saw learning as a continuous process of the reconstruction of experience. If knowledge is 'captured' and managed by the organisation, will the subsequent learning of employees be impoverished?

There have been some attempts to consider the roles of what have been loosely termed knowledge workers (Scarbrough, 1996; Whittington et al, 1994). Do such workers require different types of management structure and control? Are they, by virtue of their mastery of rare knowledge in a stronger position to determine their own destiny in the labour market? What are the implications of the emergence of this group of workers for VET and continuing professional development (CPD) activities? If knowledge workers are the elite, who has access to these jobs and what are the social equity implications for the rest of the workforce (Robertson, 1999).

Further, it may be that attempts by organisations to capture knowledge and store it may misunderstand the dynamic and interactive way knowledge is used in organisations. It may be that knowledge sharing may be a more human-centred and appropriate goal than knowledge capture. The links between experience at work and contextualised knowledge in complex work activities are not straight forward. Expertise cannot be developed through simple although extended information acquisitions from a 'knowledge store', but only through putting knowledge into action, co-developing personal and professional knowledge, and integrating individual knowledge into the larger dimensions of knowledge held by groups and whole organisations (Brown and Attwell, 1998).

6. Competing perspectives on supporting learning at work

If the focus is shifted from systemic ideas of the learning organisation and knowledge management to learning at work, then the role of learners as human actors is more likely to come to the fore. However, such an outcome is not guaranteed because there is a growing critique of the European VET agenda as being excessively instrumental in viewing learning principally as functional for work (Poell, 1998). There are competing perspectives here too, although the old adult education perspective of adult learning as having a possible transformative role (Brookfield, 1986) in giving individuals greater potential to shape aspects of their lives was sometimes in danger of being buried in a deluge of functional rhetoric.

Even where there is a more expansive policy towards learning at work, particular attention has to be paid to the participation of learners in policy development and implementation. Where companies have developed explicit policies to raise levels of learning at work, whether through employee development schemes, action learning sets or other learning actions, then particular attention needed to be paid to facilitation and support of these schemes in practice (Metcalfe, 1992). Burgoyne (1992) argued that participative policy-making was one of the characteristics of a learning organisation. Elsewhere in Europe this would be interpreted as requiring the involvement of the social partners, but Winterton and Winterton (1994) found that managements differed in how appropriate they felt it was to involve unions in issues of continuing education and training policy and practice.

As well as explicit attempts to raise levels of learning at work, much learning occurs at work through the process of work itself. On-the-job learning has a long history. In some contexts, however, learning while working has been growing in importance. Drake (1995) emphasises the significance of experience-led working for groups such as maintenance staff, who require skills such as associative reasoning, complex sensory perception, a 'feeling' for technical equipment, a capacity to synthesise information and the ability to communicate with peers in order to assess the origin of malfunctions. These skills are normally acquired through long work experience, but new forms of VET can make explicit attempts to speed the process of "experience making" through new forms of learning arrangements (Dybowski, 1997).

One clear trend within workplace learning is the attempt to draw working and learning closer together. In particular, there is an increasing awareness that learning and motivation are influenced if activities are embedded in contexts that make sense and are important for the learner (Raizen, 1994). Although there may also be times it is important for the learners that some distance is put between learning and work, so as to generate breadth of perspective. Indeed Eraut (1994) raises the question of whether successful workplace practice can necessarily be equated with a capacity to understand the ideas and concepts that inform such actions or to transfer them successfully to other contexts. For example, experienced practitioners may be seeking broader perspectives, theoretical understanding and so on. Engeström (1995) also points to the contribution theoretical concepts can make to assist individuals to understand what they are doing and why work practices are subject to change. So while meaning for the learner may often be increased by getting closer to working processes, in other cases greater distance between learning and working may be appropriate. Another important dimension to supporting learning at work is to seek to support workers in becoming self-directed learners.

One of the key issues concerning 'facilitating self-directed learning' lies in how to implement it in practice. Within companies, if they move towards becoming learning organisations and facilitate self-directed learning, they are faced with a challenge of balancing management and freedom in learning: "how can we relax control over the learning process while at the same time channelling the benefits from it? (Jones and Hendry, 1994, p. 160)" (quoted in Darmon et al, 1998, p. 29). Fully self-directed learning at work requires individuals not only to learn from work, but also to use their own initiative to find out what they need to know. Eraut et al (1998) point out that "managers' hopes that employees will be self-directed learners may not be realised if their attitude is perceived as permissive rather than positively supportive" (p. 39).

Work intensification in the form of the amount of work to be done and the speed with which people are expected to work may reinforce the routinisation and short-term nature of thinking in even complex work. This then inevitably squeezes time for medium to long-term thinking and review of practice. Hence people need support to help them engage in patterns of thought conducive to learning, simply because of the amount of their time bound up with routinised behaviours. One role for trainers is to ensure there are opportunities for reflection within work-based learning so that individuals become more effective at acquiring methods of self-learning and techniques for individual development (Infelise 1994).

7. The quality of the workplace as a learning environment

From the above it is clear that the relationship between workplace organisation, organisational goals, and patterns of working and learning may be very variable between companies. In terms of general discussions about maximising the effectiveness of the workplace as a learning environment, one key decision will be the location of and balance between development of more specialised expertise and broader vocationally oriented knowledge. The diversity both of employers and of facilities of off-the-job learning providers make it unwise to lay down any general rule. Rather it may be more appropriate to audit the learning opportunities available and the advantages and disadvantages associated with particular combinations of education, training, employment and community contexts. Knasel and Meed (1994) argue that guidance should be given to practitioners which allows them "to make informed decisions about the relative strengths and limitations of off-the-job, near-the-job and on-the-job experiences in relation to specific areas of learning and aspects of the learning process" (p iii). It is also important to monitor what happens in practice, as "work-based learning has the capacity to deliver an exceptionally challenging and rewarding learning environment. However, it can also produce sterility, where challenges are few and a series of mundane experiences lead to little learning" (Brown 1992, p. 134).

Onstenk (1994) points to the need for workplaces to offer 'strong learning environments', where it is possible for learners to apply their developing skills, knowledge and understanding in different contexts. There are some obvious difficulties for some small companies in providing the full range of learning opportunities required for the development of a broad occupational competence. Training practitioners in one study in England strongly believed that organisational culture itself could be influential, whereby "the *wrong* organisational culture would significantly inhibit effective learning" (Knasel and Meed 1994, p. 17, original emphasis). In contrast, in an organisation with a long-standing commitment to learning, then it may appear natural that workers learn with the company (Brown and Evans, 1994). Pettigrew et al (1988) saw the existence of receptive or non-receptive training contexts as influential upon the whole approach companies adopted to the development and management of their human resources.

While some small companies are reluctant to get involved in training and development (Keep and Mayhew, 1996), other relatively small or medium-sized enterprises are highly innovative, and particularly if linked into ‘multi-firm networking processes' (Rothwell, 1994), they can offer very rich learning environments. In such circumstances, work itself (and the survival of the company) is concerned "with extending levels of

organisational adaptability and flexibility and with developing new areas of knowledge and technological competence" (Rhodes and Wield, 1994, p. 168). The richness of the work/learning environment is such that knowledge and expertise rapidly develop through work, which is itself taking place in different contexts (and possibly companies).

The problem is that as Keep and Mayhew (1996) argue in many areas of the UK employers have a low demand for skills, and as a result opportunities for the development of transferability may also be limited. So attention needs to be focused not only upon the possibilities for learning associated with particular activities or jobs, but also upon the extent to which the organisation itself demonstrates a commitment to learning through its culture (Brown and Evans, 1994; Pettigrew et al, 1990). There are dangers in such contexts that the possible need for support is overlooked. Coffield (1998) quotes a finding from Ashton (1998) that in certain firms learning was thought to be "unproblematic, a natural process which occurs of its own accord and therefore did not require any special support or consideration" (p. 1). This did, however, sometimes mean that new entrants, especially graduates, received little support: there was a belief that they "learn by being 'thrown in at the deep end'" (Ashton, 1998, p. 67).

While we have strong reservations about the utility of the 'learning organisation' as a blueprint for action, at one level it has been valuable. Darmon et al (1998) point to the way the learning organisation debate has brought about a shift of "attention to the process of learning, the individuality of learning styles and creating the right environment for experiential learning to occur" (p. 29). Practical examples of a substantive commitment to learning throughout companies though remain hard to find. Eraut et al (1998) investigated the extent of organised learning support in the development of knowledge and skills in employment of 120 people operating at professional, management, team leader or technician level in 12 organisations. The organised learning support included use of mentoring and coaching; rotations, visits and shadowing; as well as reference to 'designated experts', although very few of the positive examples of learning "resulted from organisation-wide strategies or initiatives. Most were relatively informal and initiated by middle managers, colleagues or the learners themselves" (Eraut et al, 1998, p. 41). On the other hand, "negative examples where the absence of these kinds of organised support for learning on-the-job left people struggling were too numerous to count" (p. 41).

Those in need of support for learning at work, however, often turn to colleagues. Eraut et al (1998) highlight the extent to which feedback from colleagues, and consultation and collaboration within working groups can form the basis for substantive learning, including through mutual consultation and support. Additionally, membership of task groups or committees could help people develop new skills, fresh perspectives or deepen their organisational or contextual understanding. Similarly some people at work pointed to the extent to which they could learn from others outside their department, from professional networks or from suppliers and customers. One "major reason for the prevalence of learning from other people was that this [tacit] knowledge was held by individuals rather than embedded in social activities. While some knowledge was firmly embedded in organisational activities, other knowledge *was* located with a small number of individuals" (Eraut et al, 1998, p. 48, emphasis in the original).

Those interested in supporting the development of workers therefore need to be able to draw upon a variety of learning contexts, and need to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses associated with particular combinations of education, training and employment contexts. The quality of learning environments in companies can be particularly variable, and organisational cultures can either inhibit or promote effective learning. Similarly, patterns of work may be such that expertise can develop through a productive combination of working and learning. In order to make the best use of less favourable learning environments at work, it may be useful to use work-based projects, learning contracts and action planning in order to enhance and enrich work-based learning and to make it applicable to contexts beyond the immediate work environment.

8. Some final thoughts

The debates about the learning organisation, and similar ones on the need to develop a learning society or knowledge economy, seems to suggest there is a simple positive linkage between investment in education and training and the boosting of stocks of human capital, and resultant economic performance. This belief covers economic competitiveness at the levels of the individual, the locality/region, firm, sector and nation state. Researchers, including Forrester et al (1995) and Barrett et al, (1998), have shown that the kind of very simple linkage, that policy-makers assume, cannot be proved and probably does not exist. Higher levels of education and training may be a necessary precondition for greater economic success, but on their own they are not sufficient to ensure that it occurs. They are better seen as simply one part of a much wider matrix of factors that may lead to success in the marketplace. These findings beg important questions about the efficacy of the UK's current emphasis upon boosting the supply of skills, and assuming that the demand for and effective utilisation of increased skills and knowledge can be left to take care of itself. Fevre et al (1998) believe that government attempts to intervene to boost economic performance through boosting the supply of VET may be doomed to failure because of the "subtle and complex linkages" (Fevre et al, 1998, p. 1) that exist between patterns of participation in education and training and the economy.

Another consideration is the influence of the wider labour market, and one of the concerns for learning organisations may relate, particularly in the UK, to the ability of markets to cope with training and development, because many of the skills created and abilities developed could be transferable to other employers. Because of this some firms may choose not to train, but instead poach skilled workers from those that do by offering higher wages. This situation, it is argued, will eventually deter those companies that do train because they fail to retain the full benefits of their investment in skilling their employees. Such issues are of major concern within the context of a voluntaristic training system of the type operating in the UK, where employers are essentially free to decide on what, if any, training they offer their workforce, (McNabb and Whitfield, 1994; Booth and Snower, 1996; and Stevens, 1996).

Probably the most concise and clearest overview of the changing state of skill needs in the UK is provided in Green et al (1997). They highlight that there is a very mixed picture. So the level of qualifications required for recruitment to a job has risen since 1986; and the proportion of those deemed 'over-educated' for their current employment has not changed dramatically. On the other hand a significant minority

of people do not report any increase in their skill levels, and the groups that are losing out in skills acquisition include those in part-time jobs, the self employed, those aged over 50, and those in low status occupations Green et al (1997). That some already disadvantaged groups are falling further behind, while there is a gradual upskilling for many of those in work, should be a particular concern.

Hence it should be apparent that any consideration of the learning organisation needs to be set in the context of a framework of lifelong learning, that addresses issues concerned with social inclusion, participation and societal needs. This is what the Fryer (1997) report on lifelong learning attempted to do, and it does provide a wider context than just attempting to anticipate the skills required of the workforce of the future (Avis, 1998). Ecclestone (1998), however, warns of the dangers of an uncritical acceptance of current lifelong learning policy developments. This is because "underlying new possibilities are ideological tendencies which may be far from progressive … [and] we have to reassert the need for risk in debating what learners' needs are and how they might be met" (p. 19). For example, "the dominant notion in recent years has been of a learning society which embeds a learning market, with the market responding to economic issues and individuals rather than social imperatives" (Edwards et al, 1998). This may lead to the exclusion of older adults (Schuller and Bostyn, 1996); reproduction of patterns of inequality in terms of who can participate in learning (Macrae et al, 1997; McGivney, 1997; Keep, 1997). Tett (1996) too points to how participants in substantive learning at work tend to be under 35, come from skilled or professional backgrounds and have had positive educational experiences, whereas non-participants are older, less skilled and are more likely to have been unemployed. There are also "questions of take-up relating to gender and ethnicity although here too there are variations within groups by regions ....[so] it is essential for initiatives to be responsive to local variations" (Edwards et al, 1998, p. 38).

It may be that use of the idea of learning networks would be a more positive way to promote a more inclusive approach to learning that recognises the importance of the social context and goes beyond the confines of a 'learning organisation.' Such an approach would have the added benefit that it would also go with the strong tide of arguments against an individualist approach to lifelong learning. Duke (1995) highlights the significance of learning networks, whereby individuals draw on a range of people and resources to support their learning. Others (such as Benn, 1997; Gorard et al, 1996 and Merrifield, 1997) reinforce the point that it is the connection between individuals and a variety of other groups, networks and organisations that can give the stimulus and direction to adult learning, not simply an individual calculation of economic interest and work requirements (Chisholm, 1997; Coffield, 1997). Rees et al (1997) take this argument a stage further, and point to the way a focus upon individualisation in the development of lifelong learning can undermine concerns for structural inequalities in society. There is scope for individual agency, but even where this is expanding, it still takes place within particular social structures and contexts: "individualisation is embedded in social, economic and political practices, and yet the policy debate on lifelong learning serves to decontextualise individuals - such as their families, locations and networks" (Edwards et al, 1998, p. 35).

In conclusion then, there is a range of perspectives on the 'learning organisation.' There are, in particular, dangers that concerns with 'learning organisations' may

narrow the focus of VET and lifelong learning to concerns with the skills required for work. On the other hand, the 'learning organisations' debate does at least acknowledge the centrality of learning, and is at least broader than the even more narrow approach of the development of competence for current work patterns. Perhaps a move towards giving greater attention to 'learning networks', rather than 'learning organisations', would sharpen this focus still further. The area of learning thus illuminated would be much richer: incorporating a more inclusive approach to learning, that recognises the social nature of learning, the existence of multiple aims for learning and acknowledges the potential transformative nature of adult learning.

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