

Workplace Learning: Fit for Purpose?

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About the speaker

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- Learning Advisor - Panda Education & Training
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- Almost 20 years experience in education
- Community tutor, project leader, IQA, quality assurance manager
- Diverse experience - colleges, charities, training providers, university, prison and probation service
- Subjects - arts and crafts, psychology, sociology, employability skills, mathematics, English, ESOL, ICT, learning and development



Frontline perceptions of workplace learning in communication, number and digital literacy: four organisational case studies from hospitality and health & social care sectors in SE Wales

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How do workers learn and apply communication, numeracy and digital literacy skills?

Research question

Sub-questions



How and where does essential skills learning take place?



Are essential skills learnt separately (as curriculum) or together holistically?



How is formal/non-formal learning perceived by workers?

Why is this important? What is the problem?

- Lack of research evidence on essential skills learning from workers - underrepresentation of blue-collar workers and those at entry level. Programme evaluations mainly quantitative surveys, focused on views of business leaders and employers.
- Mismatch between Welsh and UK Government policymakers funding focus of formal, certified learning programmes versus where much essential skills learning takes place as literacy as social practice (Papen 2005) and in the flow of work (Felstead).
- Top-down, hierarchical approach. Arguably disempowering? Deficit/skills gap model - assumes adults are empty vessels like children. Ignores previous learning and self, peer and social/community daily learning taking place (Freire 1970). Underestimates human potential (Hull 1991).



Aim of the research study

- The aim of the research study was to observe and speak to frontline employees to understand how literacy skills were learnt and applied in work.
- Real life perspectives of entry level frontline workers in the services sector were gained through 46 semi-structured interviews and 25 periods of observation (qualitative methods).
- Job roles of research participants included everyday jobs - café baristas, hotel receptionists, healthcare assistants, support workers and cleaners.



Four
Organisational
case studies
Southeast Wales

Organisation A - Supported
Housing “HousingOrg”

Organisation B - Care Home
“CareOrg”

Organisation C - Café
“CafeOrg”

Organisation D - Hotel -
“HotelOrg”

Participant quotes

“It is a bodged qualification. People have left support worker jobs due to the new framework expectations...staff don't see the point...assessment tasks not relevant. Softer skills important...listening, care, common sense”

(Carys and Seren, supported housing trainers)

“There are NVQs offered to permanent, fulltime staff. Staff on zero hours contracts are just trained in manual handling, eLearning and fire safety” (Erin, Care assistant)

“...it's all learning on the job” (Jane, Café team leader)

“Cleaning fluids measured automatically...”

(Jamie, café barista)

“...with the temperatures....they've written on the thermometers...as long as the numbers match, I don't really need to know what it says” (Lucy, Café barista)

Key findings

Complex picture. Essential skills not static - learning happens everywhere, holistically, often by 'doing'. Sfard - Learning as participation (low status) v. learning as acquisition (high status). Essential skills defined by workers through workplace lens.

Induction period at work CRUCIAL for learning skills relevant to job. Many essential skills needed solely for completion of formal learning programmes e.g. digital literacy for e-learning.



Key findings

Mixed worker perceptions of formal workplace programmes. Contrasts with majority positive feedback from business leaders in quantitative surveys. Formal one size qualifications do not fit all.

Essential skills qualifications mandated for permanent staff in health and social care (as part of QCF/NVQ)- no similar requirement in hospitality. Professionalisation of caring role?

Access/funding issues -ESOL/casual staff offered limited formal essential skills learning in the workplace.



Key findings (continued)

Communication skills considered most important. 'Soft' skills such as team-working and problem-solving highly regarded too. These are not weighted proportionately in qualifications.

OECD, PIAAC and Wales/UK reports from Moser (1999), Leitch (2006), Webb (2007), Wolf (2011) and Donaldson (2015) argue a lack of skills impacts on the UK's ability to compete in a global, knowledge-based economy. However, frontline workers did not perceive having skills gaps at work which needed structured workplace learning to 'solve' performance and improve productivity.

None of the interviewees in this study reported higher pay or progression to a higher-level position at work due to completion of an essential (functional) skills qualification. Not linear - other factors at play.

Research challenges

Interpretations of workers and subjectivity in qualitative research method. Quantitative data limited to basic demographics.

Learning is difficult to define and separate out - “that which we know but cannot tell” (Polanyi, 1967).

No access granted to observe formal learning. No trade union learning contacts at these workplaces or direct contact with policymakers.

Pros & cons of NVivo as qualitative tool for analysis. Feminists critique computer systems designed by males to interpret female voices.

Fieldwork carried out Pre-Covid-19 - validity of data and changing work practices. Potential future research area?

Strengths of research and method



'Insider knowledge' of essential skills qualifications. Professional contacts within industries enabled access to workplaces for observations and interviews.



Benefit of carrying out interviews and observations of employees in their working environments - immediately obvious that much essential skills learning taking place through everyday workplace interactions and communities.

Any

Questions

Reflective Questions



How can we encourage more non-formal and informal methods of learning basic skills at work?



How can work based learners play more of an active role in designing and taking ownership of their learning?

Theorists

- Bandura (1997) - social learning theory, learning from each other via observation, imitation and modelling.
- Bernstein (1971:1975) - framework of curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation i.e. validity of knowledge, transmission/communication and understanding of knowledge.
- Boud and Garrick (1999) - competing interests and values in workplace learning.
- Colley et al (2002) - definitions of informal, non-formal and formal learning levels.
- Dehnbostel and Dybowski (2001) - organisational learning favour experiential, informal and self-directed learning.
- Dewey (1916) - theory of experience through social learning.
- Engeström (2001:2004) - constructivist activity theory; expansive v restrictive learning.
- Eraut (1998) - non-formal learning at work -implicit, deliberative & reactive.
- Felstead - workplace learning as 'by product', learning in 'flow' of work.

Theorists (continued)

- Freire (1970) - Pedagogy of the oppressed, banking model of education and power relations. Learning through real-life.
- Glasser (1997) - reality and choice theories promoting learner ownership.
- Hager (2004) - 'emerging paradigm of learning' - fluid, reconstructed through relationships and interactions; assumption that tacit learning outside of educational institutions is inferior whilst informal learning more common and effective.
- Hull, G. 1991. *Hearing other voices: a critical assessment of popular views on literacy and work*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Lave and Wenger (1991) - 'legitimate peripheral participation' situated learning in communities of practice; intrinsic sharing of ideas, mentoring and coaching (critique - proposed for apprentices - newcomers and old-timers).
- Leitch, S. 2006. *Prosperity for all in the Global Economy - World Class Skills*. Norwich: The Stationery Office.
- Livingstone (2001) - definitions of formal, non-formal and informal learning (criticised by Billet, 2001 -learning at work in communities structured by workplace)

Theorists (continued)

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- Sfard (1998) - activity theory; acquisition vs. participation
- Smith, K. 2024. Curriculum, knowledge and experience: A perspective from Wales. In: Czerniawski, G., Jones, S., Holmes-Henderson, A., Pountney, R. Pugh, V-M and Yang, W. (eds) *Curriculum in a Changing World*. BERA. Leicester: Troubador.
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- Stern and Sommerland (1999) - 'elasticity' to workplace learning.