Adult literacy and the discourse of skills

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Being literate has become increasingly significant as a means of human capital development and as a response to the effects of globalisation. Policies across the world commonly assume that lack of literacy restricts the ability of workers to adapt to new technology, prevents those without such skills from obtaining or retaining employment and has a negative effect on a country’s economic performance. For example, the Scottish Executive states that ‘in an increasingly globalised economy, Scotland’s future prosperity depends on building up the skills of her existing workforce and improving the employability of those seeking work’ (Scottish Executive, 2001, pp.7) and in EU policy documents there are increasing distinctions between the high knowledge-skilled and the low knowledge-skilled in promoting the skills agenda (Brine, 2006b; CEC, 2005).

More recently, Lord Leitch (2006, pp.25) outlined a bleak vision of the UK’s economic future and argued that a higher-value economy was needed to compete with India and China because ‘without increased skills, we condemn ourselves to a lingering decline in competitiveness and a bleaker future for all’. The suggested solution is to move towards a more employer driven system where opportunities to learn are made available in the workplace. This solution, however, raises difficulties as reflected in the statement issued by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development who argued that the Leitch report gave ‘too little weight to the reality that, for many employers, it is not in their financial interest to invest in portable skills that might be poached by competitors’ (Vorster, 2007). If employers have this narrow vision of learning and employee development then it is likely that learning will continue to be accessed only by those who are already well educated and the gap between the high and low skilled will continue to increase.

In the light of these policies we discuss the ways in which employers view the contribution of work-based learning, how participating learners’ experience the provision offered to them and how far work-based programmes can contribute to changing the literacy discourse from one of deficit to one of strengths.

We draw on two research projects: a study was of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Scotland (Ahlgren et al., 2007) that aimed to raise awareness and enhance understanding of workplace learning and the role of literacies in the development of individual employees and organisational sustainability; an investigation of the experiences of learners (Tett et al., 2006) from a variety of literacy programmes in Scotland that used structured individual interviews at the beginning of their programmes and one year later to map the changes reported on by learners.

Organisational learning culture

The study by Ahlgren and colleagues (2007) found that the learning culture in the workplace had a strong influence on the nature of the learning and training that was offered. Eight out of the 14 SMEs studied offered ‘expansive’ learning opportunities (Fuller and Unwin, 2004) where learning for the whole workforce were developed, employees were seen as an asset to the company and there was a belief that everybody can learn. Managers from companies with this orientation emphasised that employees should be
given the opportunity to develop in order to progress their careers and considered that the organisation would benefit from employees bringing what they had learned on their courses back to the workplace. These companies were mainly in the care sector where there were statutory requirements to train employees to meet care standards as well as record keeping requirements meant that employees needed enhanced skills in reading and writing. One manager reported that this legislation had helped her to introduce training in the company that would benefit both the company and the employees. She suggested that once continuous learning had become the norm in the organisation there was a snowball effect with colleagues helping and encouraging each other with the training.

Some managers found that older workers, particularly those that had been out of learning and training for many years and who felt intimidated at the thought of going ‘back to school’, were reluctant to take part in training. However, if the organisation had a flexible approach they found solutions such as providing extra help with literacy and report writing in informal settings that were less intimidating than formal college based sessions. Managers identified a number of advantages of training. These included employees having an increased understanding and awareness of their job and seeing themselves in the bigger picture and the growth of soft skills such as employees exercising initiative and communicating more effectively and increased confidence that often led to greater professionalism amongst staff.

Managers with a ‘restrictive’ attitude to learning (Fuller and Unwin, 2004) were more negative about opportunities and imposed limits on learning. Two of these employers suggested that employees were uninterested in learning particularly those that had been with the company a long time and were therefore too set in their ways to embrace new methods. The remaining four employers were not overtly opposed to training but had a view that training should be focused on technical skills and based on the immediate needs of the company. Staff development was not regarded as a reason for investing in training rather it was only seen as valuable if the skills being developed were essential for the running of the business. Their major concern about training was the cost involved and the loss of income when employees were not focusing directly on the job.

**Identity, learning opportunities and organisational culture**

Clearly employees working in an expansive organisational culture are part of an environment where they are encouraged to learn but not all employees were orientated to learning and so individual learner identity interacted with the organisational culture in a number of ways. Some employees had not seen themselves as learners particularly because of their earlier unhappy experiences of schooling but had been encouraged by the commitment to learning in their workplace. Many valued the informal learning opportunities to learn from colleagues and also for colleagues to learn from their own experiences. This mutual learning led to an increase in confidence as their own knowledge and experience were valued and appreciated by their employers. In other cases employees who did see themselves as learners were discouraged due to the restricted availability of training and this led to competition over those opportunities that were offered. In some manufacturing companies employers favoured those delivering services (mainly male) over those in administrative positions (mainly female).

The study by Tett and colleagues (2006) offers some insights into how learner identity can change as a result of participating in courses where learners are placed at the centre of social networks that see learning as valuable and productive. Of particular importance, they found, were changes in participants’ sense of their potential, ability and achievements
and a growing realisation that they were not as ‘thick’ as they had seen themselves, and been seen, in the past. These changes were partly attributable to particular approaches to learning that place participants’ own goals at the centre of the learning activities and create a supportive atmosphere where learners are treated with respect within relationships of trust. Many of the learners who participated in this study suggested, when reflecting back on how they felt at the start of their courses, that they had been reluctant to engage in any kind of learning: ‘School days are bad memories, and it puts you off learning because it makes you feel such a failure, and you don’t want that again’, 'I used to feel like I was a nobody at work because I just kept thinking about all the things I couldn’t do and having to hide them from my workmates'.

Many referred to feeling, ‘thick’, ‘stupid’ and ‘not very bright’ human beings and one student said that gearing herself up to go along to a group 'Was torture because I thought they would look down on me. I already looked down on myself but I had to do something to change'.

Later she was able to see herself as a competent learner but the emotions associated with the risk of that first step still remained with her. Another who successfully completed an introductory IT course in her workplace with several of her colleagues said:

    I wouldn’t go on a course myself … when a few were going together from work, then that was different, you feel OK, and if you can’t do it, you can always ask the other … and if I don’t know, then I’m not stupid on my own. We can have a giggle about being thick together.

This latter quote demonstrates the value of being part of a social group that is engaging in learning where confidence can be built through finding that others are like you and also struggle with learning. It also supports the work of Eraut (2004) who found that participation in group-activities and working alongside others regularly gave rise to learning through allowing people to observe and listen to others at work and to participate in activities. This enables the learning of new practices and new perspectives, the awareness of different kinds of knowledge and expertise and the gaining of some sense of other people’s tacit knowledge. His research also showed that working with clients/participants is an important source of learning. This is because practitioners learn ‘firstly about the client, secondly from any novel aspects of the client’s problem or request and thirdly from any new ideas that arose from their joint consultation’ (pp.250).

He also found that much learning at work occurs through doing things and being proactive in seeking learning opportunities but he emphasised that this requires confidence. Confidence comes from successfully meeting challenges in one’s work, while the confidence to take on such challenges depends on the extent to which workers feel supported in that endeavour. Thus there is a triangular relationship between challenge, support and confidence. The evidence from his research shows that both confidence in one’s ability to do the work and commitment to the importance of that work are primary factors that affect individual learning. If there is neither challenge nor sufficient support to encourage staff to seek out, or respond to, a challenge then confidence declines and with it the motivation to learn.
Workplace learning and the skills agenda

How far can work-based programmes contribute to changing the literacy discourse from one of deficit to one of strengths? We have argued that individual employee’s identities as learners are influenced by their earlier experiences of schooling, the culture of the workplace and the way in which learning and training are delivered. If these three aspects of learning are in harmony then there will be an expansive approach to learning that goes beyond skills and reaches towards a holistic approach to learning and development. Workplaces can boost employees’ confidence and function as ‘safe’ environments that encourage people back into learning. For example one literacy learner stated: 'I don’t know if I would have pursued it myself had it not been offered through work.'

If employers are to be at the centre of promoting learning in the workplace it is important that they go beyond a narrow skills agenda and instead promote a broader acquisition of expertise through providing multiple opportunities for engaging in informal and formal learning within, as well as outside of, the workplace. Encouraging learning that builds on employees’ tacit knowledge and is shared vertically and horizontally across the workplace is likely to lead to increasing competence as it regards people as knowledge-rich rather than suffering from a skills-deficit.

References


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Vorster G (2007) ‘Employers fail to sign up to Leitch skills pledge to train staff in basic


Notes

1 International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is an instrument for classifying educational programmes to allow cross-country comparison.

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