

Work-related learning and changing the nature of work

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Abstract:

This paper argues that dominant constructions of vocational education and training are too narrow and derived from technicist notions of work. With respect to the employment contract associated with waged work such constructions are presented as being in the general interests of employers. For this reason, the concept of work-related learning is proposed as an alternate more generalist conceptualisation. Within this broader framework the democratic right of working people to contribute to the organisation and structure of work is explored. Some vignettes of workplaces organised in different ways are presented.

Introduction

It is important to periodically re-consider the assumptions which underpin vocational education and training (VET). Such a review can be organised around a number of questions. These include what is VET? How does it work? What distinguishes VET as a sector of education? Why is it important? What are its strengths? What are its weaknesses and limitations? The rationale is that these questions assist in arriving at an informed position from which to begin to explore alternatives. This paper introduces the field of work-related learning albeit briefly. This proposition is derived from a critique of VET.

The notion of work-related learning is used to consider aspects of work, in particular, Joe Kincheloe's notions of good and bad work. Vignettes are presented to illustrate these categories and for further exploration of the themes of democratising work and the development of economic justice.

Section 1: VET as a double edged sword

What is VET?

Leo Maglen defined VET as

. . . taken to encompass all educational and instructional experiences – be they formal or informal, pre-employment or employment related, off-the-job or on-the-job – that are designed to directly enhance the skills, knowledge, competencies and capabilities of individuals, required in undertaking gainful employment.

(Maglen in Blunden, 1997: ix)

Subsequently, a program is distinguished as a VET program when it is designed with the intention and purpose of being for gainful employment. Smith and Keating (1997: 3), describe VET as ‘an international term that describes the development and improvement of skills and knowledge for the specific purpose of improvement in an individual’s capacity in productive work’.

How does VET work?

John Stevenson (1990) has argued that course design in VET is based on three principles. These are relevance, responsiveness and uniqueness. Firstly, VET courses are relevant in the sense that they are based on the current requirements identified and agreed to by employers. Employers who are the buyers of labour in the exchange transaction that occurs in the labour market are one of the major stakeholders in VET and have certainly become the major powerbroker. VET courses set out with the primary aim of developing the skills, knowledge and attitudes that employers want. This links with the policy initiative of developing a training market and moving decisions about training to the demand side of that market. VET courses emphasise those skills, knowledge and attitudes that employers deem to have value on the labour market and which the employers are prepared to purchase and reward through the remuneration of wages. In this way, VET programs can be described as imparting ‘market driven knowledge’ or ‘valuable’ knowledge.

In the same way, VET is said to be responsive. Responsive in the sense of addressing the skills and knowledge ‘demands’ of the market. The relevance and responsiveness of VET courses give them utility and usefulness. Stevenson’s third principle of uniqueness has become more problematic though no other sector of education systemically hands such important determinations about knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy over to employers and corporate interests.

It is suggested then that one of the primary concerns of the VET field has become how to fit working people to the demands of employers. In recent times, VET research and practices have been focused upon attempts at improving the efficiency of these endeavours. In the main, the VET field, from practitioners through to researchers, finds these activities to be unproblematic. In fact, it can be argued that access to power and inclusion within this field is awarded to those that not only believe in, but who can actively contribute towards improving the efficiency of the existing system.

Why VET is important?

Over the past decade, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on arguing for workplace reform justified by an argument for developing a future based on a highly skilled workforce. The major strategy within this approach was the development of skill based career paths, where wages were aligned to competency, and skill acquisition was rewarded with increased wage remuneration.

Such an approach makes VET important to working people (worker/learner/citizens) as it provides a pathway and a potential for increasing their power, through access to increased wages. Therefore, participation in VET programs provides learner/workers with access to skills and knowledges that have been deemed by employers, the

purchasers of labour power, to have value on the labour market. The acquisition of skills and knowledge potentially improves workers bargaining power within the exchange relations of the workplace and labour market. In this way providing worker/learners with access to increased wages is presented as a significant form of empowerment. While this paper recognises this important role of VET programs it also argues that because workers remain fundamentally within the wage/labour relations of the workplace and labour market that any improved position within that relationship can only represent a limited form of empowerment. It also attempts to open up discussion on whether this has to be so or instead might worker/learners/citizens develop a different type of education that is more appropriately aligned to a pro-active, collective 'class' interest. Such an education might emphasis the human agency of working people and their role as citizens in a democratic society.

The critique of VET?

As with any field, expert opinion is often divided and contested. Joe Kincheloe (1999:112) explains that, 'in 1916 John Dewey clearly delineated the problems with mainstream vocational education: It perpetuates the weakest aspects of the industrialised economy, thus becoming an instrument in the construction of "the feudal dogma of social predestination". . . .'. In response, Dewey felt that a democratic vocational education would realise and teach "the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation.", (Kincheloe in Gabbard, 2000: 323 – 333; Kincheloe 1999).

Democracy is a concept that is derived from the Greek words, demos – the people and kratein – to rule. Hence democracy is about 'the people rule'. Parker & Guelle (1998) explain 'all the procedures and protections that we usually associate with democracy – elections, rights to debate, a free press, for example – are simply a means to achieve 'the power of the people'. So while educators (and others) tell working people that we live in a democracy, and that education within a democratic society is a social good, we use course design procedures that fit working people to the demands of employers, simply because employers have buying power in the labour market. VET professionals attempt to do this by developing curriculum and pedagogical practices that will achieve this match up in the most efficient way possible. VET practitioners and researchers alike call this empowering our students as we justify it by providing course participants with skills, knowledge, attitudes and credentials that will improve their bargaining position in the labour market. In theory, this occurs by increasing the worker/learner's human capital. Ignored is the fact that working people are not involved in the process. Meanwhile VET professionals use their position as educators to tell working people that these programs are in their best interests. Considering the amount of evidence that disputes the effectiveness of human capital theory, particularly that associated with race/ethnicity, gender and class but also age, disability and place, it is suggested here that this might be seen as undemocratic and hegemonic from the point of view of working people.

VET: some of the strengths and weaknesses

VET can in many ways be considered as a double-sided sword. The strengths of VET offer advantages to the participants in these courses. Yet in many cases these may be

realised at some cost. The three principles from Stevenson cited above mean that the VET qualifications when completed would be matched to the specific and current requirements of the job. Participants in VET courses will develop abilities that employers want and are willing to pay. In this way, their abilities will have utility and value on the existing labour market. This places graduates of VET programs in good stead within the capitalist political economy.

For some this also represents a major weakness of VET. For in the same way, it may subordinate the worker/learners to the interests of capital. The determination of what constitutes 'useful' knowledge for working people is in the hands of employers. The knowledge of working people gets left to managerial prerogative and the market. Subsequently, it may be contrary to the interests of the learners.

In summary, on the one hand, VET can have strengths relating to currency and alignment with the requirements of the labour market and in this way it is empowering. On the other hand a critique can be developed which argues that VET programs are often narrowly focused, instrumental, technicist, corporate, undemocratic and hegemonic to some of the broader class interests of the learners – at its worst VET might be considered the 'lackey' sector.

However if we accept the possibilities of such a critique, what can be done? Can this critique begin to identify and lay the foundations for more desirable approaches? Two possible approaches are outlined below. The first is very general and broad in its scope – this is the notion of work-related learning. The second is more specific and can be considered a subset of the first. This involves what has been called 'a critical postmodern pedagogy of work'.

Section 2: Work-Related Learning

My own experience of work, and of workplaces, leads me to believe that there are indeed very many important aspects of work to be systematically considered and learnt - beyond productive skills. In its simplest form, work-related learning is *for* and *about* work and draws on multiple perspectives. It recognises that the activity of work can be contextualised in many different ways. It seems that part of active participation in a democracy would necessarily involve consideration of bigger picture aspects of how work fits within particular contexts. One line of analysis could locate work within, and interwoven with a complex array of social, technical and economic relations.

A critical postmodern pedagogy of work

Joe Kincheloe (1999:181) suggests that there are five traditions in American VET programs. The first facilitates student decisions about careers. Second, VET helps students develop the skills needed to obtain and keep a job. Third, it provides students with an alternative educational environment that will benefit underachieving students and discipline problems. Four, VET teaches students technical work skills, and finally, it solves larger society's economic problems. Kincheloe acknowledges these roles but goes further to suggest a different approach which he calls 'a critical postmodern pedagogy of work'. Kincheloe's approach is derived from the application by McLaren, Giroux and others, of critical theory to schools and pedagogy, (hence,

critical pedagogy) but Kincheloe takes this concept and applies critical pedagogy to work and vocational education. Simon, Diplo and Schenke (1991), others working in this field, argue that work education and vocational education rarely questions taken-for-granted and dominant ways of seeing. Instead they suggest that a critical pedagogy of work should take as its purpose the challenging of comfortable assumptions about work and education. Therefore a critical pedagogy of work involves the problematising of work, and of the education that is associated with work.

Early in this century, John Dewey presented an analysis of work pointing out problems that existed. Unfortunately, his list is still relevant today and remains a good place to begin to explore issues around work and education. On this list are corporate power and its misuse, an inequitable distribution system, an irrational system of production, constricted information flow and an abundance of misinformation, technologies not attuned to human needs, class stratification, bureaucratisation of work and life, and the failure to democratise the scientific method, (Kincheloe 1995:56).

The most generic feature of a critical postmodern pedagogy of work is its recognition of the relationship between power, work and education. From there it teaches students how to evaluate work, and how to identify faults and contradictions in work situations. This approach acknowledges that the self-esteem of men and women and their standing in the community is often closely related to work. Such an approach also embraces a new economics that takes the cultivation of human potential vis-a-vis the ethics of difference and solidarity as its starting point. It begins to restore the knowledge of the work process and the overview of the relation of the job to the larger economic process back to everyday workers. Further it understands that work and work education are important sites of identity production.

Like other critical pedagogies, a critical postmodern pedagogy of work, utilises and encourages, a language of critique and a language of possibilities. The next section of this paper explores these two ideas through the notion of 'bad work' and 'good work', (Kincheloe 1999: 64 –90).

Bad Work

A critical postmodern pedagogy of work problematises work. Turning the language of critique to analysis of the workplace immediately identifies two of the major issues relating to work – these are exploitation and alienation. Marx argued that these were features of capitalist production. He believed that alienation was an objective state embedded in the capitalist labour process. Noon & Blyton (1997) explain,

[Alienation] is an unavoidable objective state in which all workers find themselves. It manifests itself because in selling their labour power, employees are relinquishing the right to control their own labour, thus discretion over how and when work should be undertaken becomes the prerogative of employers. This subordination of employees to employers (or to managers as agents of capital) makes the activity of work a degrading and dehumanising activity.

Marx also foresaw an alternative construction of labour power under non-capitalist conditions. It is proposed here that such a pathway can be related to the notion of 'good work', while exploitation and alienation are aligned to 'bad work'.

Kincheloe (1999) has developed a list of eight features that he suggests characterise 'bad work'.

- (1) Social Darwinism: workers must operate under the law of the jungle. Those who succeed at work are the fittest.
- (2) Nature as enemy: one of the basic of human struggle involves man versus nature.
- (3) Science as fact provider: positivism covertly shapes the nature of the workplace.
- (4) Efficiency as maximum productivity: worshipping the bottom line
- (5) The supremacy of system efficiency and cost benefit analysis models, or the effectiveness of standardised inputs in the quest for agreed upon outputs
- (6) People proof jobs: designing work so that no matter how dumb a worker might be, the job can still be done.
- (7) Short term goals: the absence of ethical vision
- (8) The contingency of human happiness and human motivation as the acquisition of better consumer items. The first commandment of modernism is thou shall consume.

Good Work

Good work is founded on an attempt to establish economic justice and workplace democracy. These call for alternative social, technical and economic relations of work. In keeping with the intentions of a critical pedagogy of work and following the idea of developing a language of possibilities, we next turn to Kincheloe's listing of ten principles for good work.

- (1) the principle of self direction, good work as a labor of risk
- (2) the principle of the job as a place of learning – work as a research laboratory
- (3) the principle of work variety – freedom from repetitive boredom
- (4) the principle of workmate cooperation – overcoming the fractured social relations of the workplace
- (5) the principle of individual work as a contribution to social welfare
- (6) the principle of work as an expression of self – workers are more than the sum of their behaviours
- (7) the principle of work as a democratic expression – freedom from the tyranny of authoritarian power
- (8) the principle of workers as participants in the operation of an enterprise - until workers are active participants talk of workplace cooperation rings hollow
- (9) The principle that play is a virtue and must be incorporated into work.
- (10) The principle of better pay for workers in relation to the growing disparity between managers and workers.

It is suggested that these principles are useful yet remain abstract and that it is in the exploration of actual workplaces, both, exemplars and ordinary where such features can become authentic. The next section presents four vignettes.

Section 3: ‘Actually existing workplaces’

This section provides four vignettes of workplaces that are considered exemplars of some of the principles and features listed above. The first two are representative of workplaces during the 1970s and have an historical significance. The remaining two are representative of workplaces in particular regions. It is envisaged that the curriculum content for a critical postmodern pedagogy of work could contain many such vignettes. Again these are intended to contribute to the development of a language of critique and a language of possibilities.

Vignette #1: Chrysler Corporation - Detroit (1970)

Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin (1998: 9-11) recall the story of James Johnson in their book *Detroit: I do mind dying*. Johnson was a black autoworker at the Gear & Axle plant of the Chrysler Corporation in Detroit. The plant had been the site of a number of bitter wildcat strikes and in one two week period there had been two industrial deaths from on-the-job accidents. In 1970 car production reached 6.5 million while in the same year, the United Auto Workers (UAW) records show that there were 15,000 injuries in auto factories across the country. On July 15th 1970, James Johnson entered the plant where he worked with an M-1 carbine hidden in the trouser leg of his overalls. He took out the carbine and shot dead, a black foreman, a white foreman and a white job setter.

Johnson had no record of violence and these actions were considered to be totally out of character. Johnson did not drink, he wasn't a ladies man, and in fact he was a bible reader. However on the morning of the shootings Johnson had received a suspension after he had refused to participate in a work speed up. After further review, it was found that Johnson had been treated unfairly in other incidents by the company where he had been docked pay and lost vacation time.

In his defence his attorney presented evidence to show that the Chrysler plant at Eldon was one of the most dangerous in the country. His lawyer took the jury to the scene of the shooting so that they could judge the harshness of the working conditions for themselves. The jury later acquitted James Johnson finding that he was not responsible for his actions. In a separate court action, in May 1973, Johnson was awarded compensation from Chrysler.

In 1970 productivity in the auto industry was at a high and further increases were being sought. As productivity rose, so did the number of serious accidents, and of the 4000 workers that worked at the plant at Eldon, some 70% were black. The company called its production methods automation, but the workers at the plant coined the term “niggermation” and the plant at Eldon was the most “niggermated factory in Detroit”, (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998: 86 – 106).

Vignette #2 Lucas Aerospace (1974 – 75)

During the 1970s the British based Lucas Aerospace worked on and made equipment for Concorde. Some similar companies had experienced major rationalisations and

restructures; GEC had recently sacked 60,000 workers with a wide range of skills. This sent shock waves through those working at Lucas and they subsequently formed a company wide union Combine committee. The Combine committee is quite unique in the British trade union movement. First, because such a committee crosses over a number of sites, thus stopping workers at one site being pitted against those at another. Second because the committee links together the representatives of technologists and engineers through to the semi-skilled workers on the shop floor.

As structural unemployment closed in on these workers they decided to resist. For the workers at Lucas it seemed absurd that they had all these skills, knowledge and facilities, while at the same time society urgently needed equipment and services, which they could provide, but which the market economy was incapable of linking.

Mike Cooley (1987), a key participant, suggested that four contradictions influenced what happened at Lucas Aerospace. First there was an appalling gap existing between what technology could provide for society and what it actually provides. Second, their seemed to be a tragic waste of our society's most precious asset, the skills, ingenuity, energy, creativity and enthusiasm of its ordinary people. Third, the myth that computerisation, automation and the use of robotic devices will automatically free human beings from soul destroying, backbreaking tasks and leave them free to engage in more creative work. Four, a growing hostility in society towards science and technology as presently practised.

The workers at Lucas prepared a document which described in detail the nature of its workforce, it detailed their ages, skills, qualifications, the machine tools, equipment, and laboratory facilities. They put this information together with the scientific staff and the design capabilities and sent it in a letter to some 180 authorities, universities, trade unions and other organisations. The recipients were chosen on the grounds that they had been active in some substantial way in calling for the humanising of technology and the use of technology for socially responsible ways. In their letter they asked what could a workforce with these skills and facilities make that would be in the interests of the broader community. This telling exercise received only four individual responses.

Next, the Combine committee asked its members in a questionnaire what they thought they should be making and in a four-week period the committee received 150 different product ideas. In an effort to save their jobs the committee put together an alternate plan of what they could be doing at the plant which they intended to present to management for their consideration. Writing up of the plan started in January 1975 and was completed in January 1976, (Wainwright & Elliott 1982; Cooley 1987).

The plan had four parts. The first part was documentation of the productive resources at Lucas Aerospace. The second part provided an analysis of the problems and needs facing these workers as a result of changes in the aerospace industry and the world economy. The third part was an assessment of the social needs, which the available resources could meet. The fourth section detailed proposals about products, the production processes, the employment development program, which could contribute, to the meeting of these different needs.

The product range was classified into six major areas:

- (1) Medical equipment which included kidney machines, artificial limb control, a hobcart which gave people with spina bifida mobility and a life support system for ambulances.
- (2) Alternative energy sources, this included heat pump units, solar cell technologies, windmills and fuel cell technologies.
- (3) Transport system, including a road/rail vehicle, airship, and a hybrid power pack for motor vehicles;
- (4) Braking systems;
- (5) Oceanics which included submersible vehicle;
- (6) Telechric devices, remote control equipment and 'hands at a distance' devices.

On the 9th January 1976, 37 shop stewards meet with 7 members of Lucas top management and in a two hour meeting the stewards presented the plan. The personnel manager accepted the plan but was non-committal. The managers agreed to bring a reply back to a second meeting. This meeting never took place and management did what it could to shelve the plan.

Bill Williams, a technical manager summed up what was really at stake “I’m quite sure personally that the issue was not the viability of the products from an engineering point of view: the real issue at stake was who manages Lucas”. In May 1976, the company offered a written response, which they distributed throughout the Plant but never formally gave to the Combine committee. In this they wrote,

‘ . . . the company reminds the report’s authors that it has a longstanding capability and reputation for producing a wide range of aerospace systems and components, and believes that the only way to secure jobs in the market economy is to manufacture the products which the Company is best at producing efficiently and profitably’

(Wainwright & Elliott 1982: 115)

At issue was the question of ‘who manages Lucas Aerospace, and to the senior managers this was a non-negotiable issue. At the heart of that issue, were power, control and managerial prerogative.

Vignette #3 The Maquiladora

Karmel & Hoffman (1999) tell us that the maquiladoras – foreign owned assembly plants clustered along the Mexico – US border – are one manifestation of a worldwide trend in which industrial production is concentrated in areas with an abundant supply of low wage labor. Maquiladoras, also known as export- processing plants, first appeared in 1965 when the Mexican government initiated the Border Industrialisation Program as a means of attracting foreign investment. The BIP was aimed at lowering unemployment through the shifting of some US production to locations of low cost labor in Mexico. This strategy didn’t work out as planned, as the unemployed male workers were further displaced as the industry showed a preference for women workers - who were hired more cheaply and would presumably offer a more pliable and docile labor force (sic).

In 1998 there were over 3000 maquiladoras with over one million employees. 81% of these were production workers and 56% of these were women workers. 75% of the maquiladoras were located along the border and 79% of the employees lived in the border region. 832 of the maquiladoras were in garment assembly and textiles while 470 were involved in electrical and electronic accessories, 450 were manufacturing of other items and 340 were assembling furniture and related items.

Under NAFTA the tax breaks were not confined to the border region and so it was expected that this would relieve the strain of some of the border regions. The maquiladoras are exempt from paying local taxes and so left with no funds for infrastructure and services; living conditions in their locality became harsh.

The Maquiladora towns show a particularly lopsided form of urban development. Mostly industry operates in clean, modern industrial parks with state of the art facilities while thousands of workers live in cardboard shacks in shantytowns without plumbing, electricity, running water or garbage collection. Further, the lax enforcement of health and safety standards has attracted businesses that are looking to cut costs. This makes the workplaces and the nearby communities dangerous to work in, and to live. Inside the plants, worker safety is often overlooked in the interests of maximising profits. Meanwhile most maquila workers are earning the equivalent of \$25 to \$50 a week.

The Maquiladora industry operates as an export enclave. They operate in “free trade zones” which have little interrelationships with the host country’s economy. Little of the raw materials or components are supplied from Mexican suppliers and there is little technological transfer. Profits from the industry are typically whisked off to the United States or South Korea where investors are based. Consequently, the maquiladoras do not promote true development of the Mexican economy. The industry offers a vivid example of the costs of economic policies that privilege corporate profits above all other considerations, rather than bringing them into balance with the needs of workers, communities and the environment.

Throughout Mexico and Latin America the term ‘neoliberal’ is in wide use referring to an overall framework for economic policy that emphasises privatisation, production for export, reduced public investment in health and education and social services, reduction or elimination of barriers to foreign investment, weakening of labor and environmental regulations, and fiscal and monetary policies that favour the needs of transnational capital. The maquiladoras have come to epitomise neoliberalism. Meanwhile regional agreements like NAFTA in the form of Asia Pacific Agreement on Economic Cooperation, the World Trade Organisation, and the currently postponed Multilateral Agreement on Investment look at continually expanding their realms of influence.

Vignette #4 Mondragon

Macleod (1997) and Mathews (1999) explain that the idea for the cooperatives of Mondragon located in the Basque region came from a priest, Don Jose Maria Arizmendiarieta. The development of the Mondragon Cooperatives has fallen into two phases. The first phase began in 1956 while the second occurred with an overhaul of the complex in 1991. The Mondragon complex has over 30,000 workers

and over six billion dollars in annual sales. This complex integrates businesses, a university, a research institute and a cooperative owned bank. The workers and their customers own the total complex. Named the Mondragon Corporacion Cooperativa (MCC) since 1986,

- MCC is a more important economic player in the Basque region than GM is in the USA;
- Ikerlan is the only Spanish research firm to meet the technical specifications for NASA;
- Caja Laboral Popular has been rated as among the 100 most efficient financial institutions in the world in terms of its profit/asset ratio;
- The Eskola Politeknika, enrolls 2000 students, and is considered the best technical institute in Spain;
- MCC's distribution branch, Eroski, opened more "hyper-markets" than any other retailing group in the country;
- MCC's capital goods division is the market leader in metal cutting tools in Spain, as is its division that makes refrigerators, washing machines and dishwashers;
- MCC engineers have built turnkey factories in China, North Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. (Macleod 1997)

Initially, Don Jose Maria set up a technical school and in 1956 five young recently graduated engineers set up a business to put into place some of the ideas they had picked up from their teacher. The company called ULGOR derived from the first letter of each of their names initially produced oil stoves. With the assistance of their former teacher they borrowed money and went into production following principles of democratic decision making, profit sharing and community responsibility.

Ten principles underpin the Mondragon Cooperatives,

1. Open admission,
2. Democratic organisation,
3. Sovereignty of labour,
4. Instrumental character of capital,
5. Self management,
6. Pay solidarity,
7. Group cooperation,
8. Social transformation,
9. Universal nature, and
10. Education.

Mondragon has four enterprise groups, financial, industrial, distribution and corporate. The financial group has six enterprises, while the industrial has sixty-seven enterprises that produce a vast range of products from automotive parts, domestic appliances, bicycles and bus bodies. The distribution group has eight enterprises; Eroski, which has 264 stores, dominates the consumer sector. The corporate activities group consists of fifteen enterprises. These serve the total commercial complex as well as the community in general. The most important activities of this group are in the area of education and research. Within higher education is Alecoop, a student enterprise. This is a cooperative industry which originated as a spin off from the Polytechnical university. Interestingly, students work half the day in the factory and study in the university during the other half of the day.

Three economic aspects make the Mondragon Cooperatives unique. First is the wages, most groups use a 4:1 ratio as a guide to the range of wage differentials with none above 6:1. The elected social council allocates numerical values to each worker. Each worker is initially given a value of 1.0, so if a worker gains a technical diploma then this can be raised by 0.1. If however the worker is responsible for a team then 0.3 may be added to their value. Similarly, points are added for years of experience. The main factors in this equation are education, seniority, supervisory responsibility and performance evaluation.

The second economic aspect is the internal economics. A worker-member must make contributions. Initially, the worker's personal ability is tested during probationary period after which they are required to make a capital contribution of one year's wages. The worker can borrow this from the bank or set up a pay deduction system.

The third aspect is profit sharing. Any profits which remain after salaries and other expenses are then divided up in a pre-determined fashion. A typical division would be 10% to the socio-cultural fund; 20% to the company reserve fund; 70% to the worker-members.

This model of cooperation stands in contrast to most other organisations of production and utilisation of capital. The major feature is the primacy of labour and community and the subordination of capital to the requirements of the community. It is hoped that the four vignettes provide a snapshot into the potential such case studies might hold for the curriculum and pedagogy in the opening up of learning as it relates to work, and work practices for broader consideration by worker/learner/citizens.

Conclusion

An activist's approach soon gives rise to dissatisfaction with the dominant discourses as they are used in relation to VET in Australia. On the one hand, vocational skills and knowledges are important to provide working people with 'valuable' knowledge. This skill acquisition stands to theoretically increase workers human capital and improve their bargaining power in the labour market. Yet for worker/learner/citizens this involves a limited form of empowerment for as important as a means to accessing increased wages is, this form of empowerment remains within the capitalist relations of work.

What is proposed is that in conjunction to the development of 'valuable' knowledge worker/learners require space to be involved as active citizens in considerations of the nature of work, work practices and its nesting within broader political, social and economic contexts. To this end it can be argued that working people require 'a real education, not one that keeps them dumb'. This paper proposes that vignettes of work, hold potential as part of the curriculum content in such programs, but acknowledges that decisions on this need to be made by the participants in these programs, the learner/worker/citizens. These four vignettes also remain within the capitalist relations of work and so may be thought of as not going far enough. This then leads to explorations of other organisations and arrangements of work within alternate forms of political economy.

Finally, it is envisaged that such re-conceptualisations will challenge those involved in VET teacher education to consider their own political and ethical stance as they contemplate whether they want to be involved in the education of architects or bees. If it's the former then it maybe necessary to consider a move to a broader field of work-related learning, of which VET occupies only a small part.

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