

Teenagers' full-time work and learning: A case study in what research findings say about policy, practice, theory and further research possibilities

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the example of the author's recently-completed PhD thesis to illustrate how research findings can have implications for policy, practice and theory. Although the creation of new knowledge is itself of value, it is becoming increasingly important for research findings to have practical utility. The PhD thesis, on a topic of great political and educational interest which, curiously, has been under-researched, provided an opportunity to explore the possible outcomes of a piece of research.

THE STUDY

Rationale and research method

The study (Smith, 2000) examined the learning experiences of Australian young people starting full-time work in their teenage years. Despite the expansion of higher education in the past twenty-five years, most Australians still start work immediately after leaving school. Although the labour market for young people has become increasingly difficult, with a growing casualisation of the workforce and high youth unemployment (Sweet, 1988, 1998), the majority of school-leavers, even early leavers, still manage to find full-time work (Marks & Fleming, 1999). Yet, over the last 25 years, there have only been a few studies of young people in their first jobs. There has been some previous qualitative research in young people's learning in the early months of work but this research is now outdated and is mostly from overseas (eg Ashton & Field, 1976; West & Newton, 1983; Griffin, 1985; Reeders, 1989; Borman, 1991). Moreover, these studies have not focussed specifically on the young people's learning; this topic is generally only addressed in studies of apprenticeship (eg Harris, Willis, Simons & Underwood, 1998). Virtually no scholarly literature exists on traineeships (C. Robinson, 1999). Thus, although much attention is given to entry-level training policy by Australian governments, there is little qualitative research into the actual experiences of the young people for whom such policies are created.

The study comprised eleven case studies, following eleven young people (aged 16 to 18) in New South Wales through their first twelve months of full-time work. There were four apprentices, four trainees, and three 'juniors' who did not have a contract of training. The young people worked in a range of private-sector industries. Interviews with the young people were supplemented by interviews with the important adults in their working and learning lives: their managers, their parents and their TAFE teachers where applicable. Those young people who changed jobs were followed into their new jobs and their new managers interviewed.

The findings

Two research questions were posed: 'What do young people learn about work in their first year of full-time work?' and 'How do they learn it?'. In answer to the first question, ten 'domains' or possible types of learning were proposed: technical skills, generic competencies, knowledge about the occupation, learning about the organisation, learning about the industry, job-keeping and 'political' skills, industrial relations, learning about oneself and learning about learning. The actual number of domains in which young people learn and the depth of learning within the domains is determined by eight facilitating factors: industry training tradition, firm's training culture, work organisation, people at work, family and friends, off-the-job training, government policies and institutions, and young person's attributes. These factors form a 'filter' through which possible learning may or may not reach the young people. If the factors are favourable, they enable the learning potential of the first year at work to be realised (Smith, 1999). Figure 1 shows these findings diagrammatically.

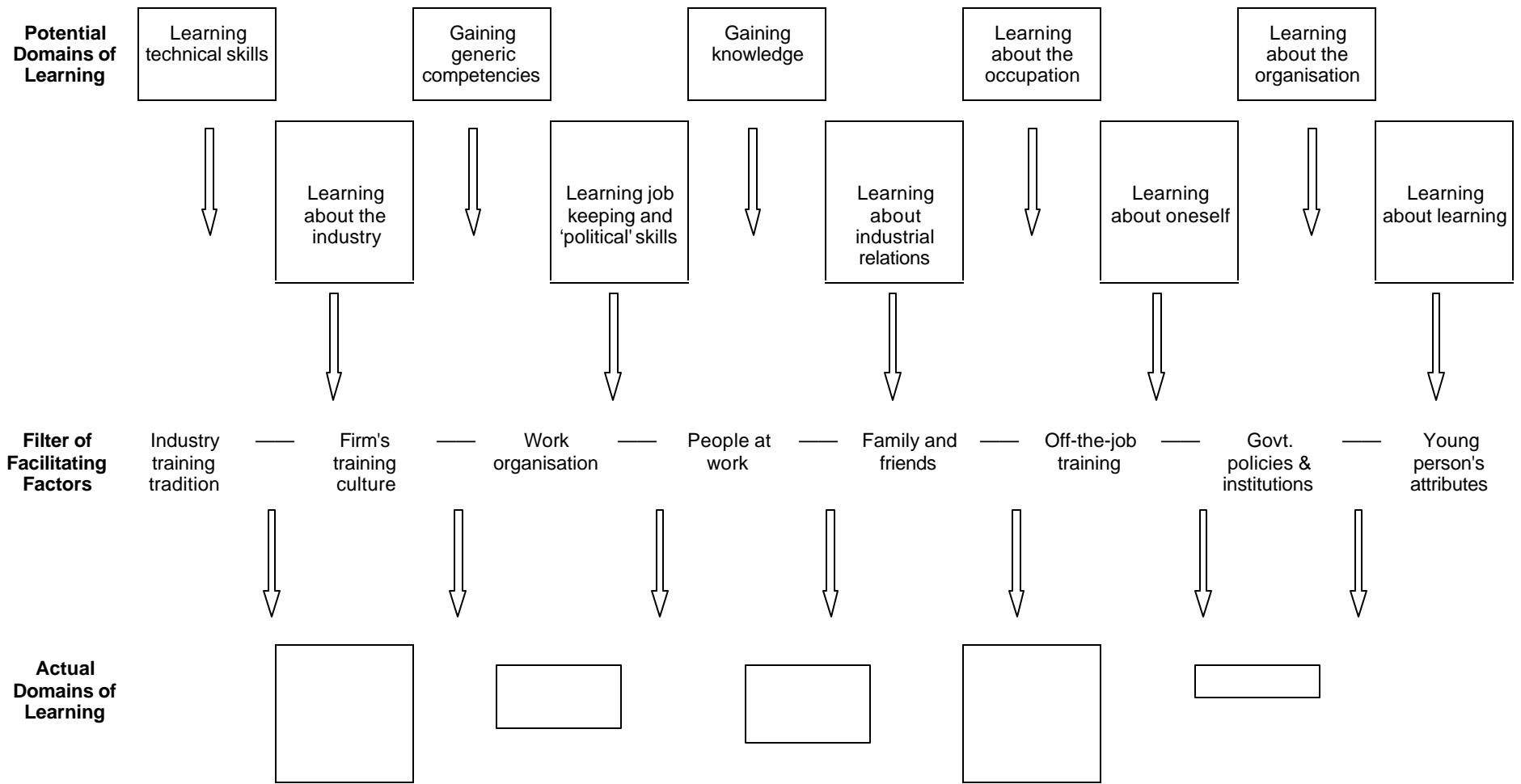


Figure 1: Potential and actual domains of learning available to young people in their first year at work

In answer to the second question, four major sources of knowledge were identified:

1. Workplace sources;
2. Off-the-job training;
3. Family and friends; and
4. 'Outside' jobs and 'outside' learning.

1. *Workplace sources:*

Workmates and supervisors provided most training. In some cases workmates were more helpful; in some cases supervisors were. Customers and suppliers were also valuable sources of learning. As well as providing information about products they also provided opportunities for the young people to gain feedback on their performance. Further sources of learning were print or electronically based. Some of the young people had access to company manuals, induction handbooks, product information and the Internet. Sometimes these were used quite intensively; sometimes hardly at all.

2. *Sources connected with off-the-job training:*

As with workplace sources, these could be divided into people and other resources. Teachers were generally useful sources for the young people. They taught technical skills and propositional knowledge, provided information about other employers in the industry, and helped the young people gain self-confidence. Other students were also valuable sources of learning. Off-the-job training also brought with it print, audio-visual and (to a very limited extent) electronic resources. These were rarely mentioned by the young people as being useful sources of learning.

3. *'Outside' jobs and 'outside' learning:*

'Moonlighting' provided an extra source of learning for a small number of young people. It appears to be most common amongst the building trade. 'Outside' courses were an additional form of learning. These were undertaken by two of the young people to prepare for future work needs.

4. *Sources connected with family and friends:*

The provision by these people of the opportunity to reflect upon experiences and discuss work problems was valuable. However more specific learning also took place. Parents and siblings were able to pass on their knowledge of the young person's industry or of workplace issues in general. The young people, through discussion with their peers, gained a greater understanding of different workplaces and a greater appreciation of the relative status and potential of their own workplaces.

Processes of learning were categorised into *taught*, *sought* and *wrought*. 'Taught' refers to learning which is explicitly provided to the young person. It may be formal or informal. 'Sought' refers to learning as a result of active seeking by the young person, by reading, questioning, consciously observing other workers or deliberately seeking new tasks in order to learn. 'Wrought' applies to learning which is 'fashioned' from experience rather than being

intentional, and roughly equates to Marsick & Watkin's (1990) category of 'incidental learning'. It needs to be noted, though, that the young people needed to be capable of reflection (Kolb, 1984) for much learning to be 'wrought' from experience. The more reflective they were, the greater the learning. Hence wrought learning is more purposeful than Marsick & Watkin's 'incidental learning'.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

The findings of this study have uncovered a number of difficulties in existing theories relating to workplace learning and to young people starting work. The most problematic areas are discussed below.

Performance

Literature on workplace learning in general, and expertise in particular (eg Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986), does not acknowledge the importance of the level of performance in any discussion of individuals' work and learning. The study, however, showed that the young people's performance affected their interest in, and capacity for, learning; as well as the way in which other workers viewed them and were prepared to develop them. Cornford and Athanasou's brief (1995) discussion of 'learning ability' needs developing further and needs to include working ability as well as learning ability.

Situated learning

Currently fashionable, situated learning theories suggest people learn through their participation in a 'culture of expert practice' (Collins, Brown & Newman, 1989). The literature, much of which is based upon anthropological studies in third world countries (eg Childs & Greenfield, 1980; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Chaiklin, 1993) attempt to extrapolate findings from communities of practice in those countries to modern workplaces. The current study indicates that while some of the activities described in situated learning theory, for instance involvement in low-skilled but authentic activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991) are utilised in modern workplaces, the concept of enculturation into a homogeneous community of practice as such is not found. The workplaces and work processes were too diverse for this; moreover, most of the young people belonged to two communities of practice: the occupation and the organisation. Organisational issues are not separated out, in the situated learning literature; the literature appears to assume that organisational culture is synonymous with occupational culture.

Transition to work

The large body of literature on this topic proposes various theories and models. One group of writers (Sweet 1998; Dwyer & Wyn, 1998; Marsh and Williamson, 1999), in what might be termed the 'doom and gloom' school, suggest that young people entering work in the 1990s in Australia, particularly those who leave school before completing Year 12, should resign themselves to at least a medium-term prospect of unstable, part-time, low status work. The sample for the current study was, of course, biased, in that the young people had all managed to find full-time work. But there was little evidence to suggest that the young people had experienced any particular difficulty finding the jobs; they were almost all in work which they particularly wanted to do, and they were all able to find alternative jobs reasonably quickly when they decided they wanted to move. Recent statistical evidence that the majority of teenagers not at school are in full-time work (ABS Series 6203.0, April 1999) tends to support the findings of the study. The research indicates that there has been a tendency to focus on those at risk. Although important in policy terms, this tendency has presented a false picture of the difficulty of transition from school to work in Australia.

The findings also indicate that young people's 'adjustment problems' at work are not so great as has been imagined. While starting work was undoubtedly stressful (as reported by West & Newton, 1983), the young people generally received a good deal of support from their employers, who were determined to make the transition as easy as possible. The skills which helped the young people settle quicker were those covered by the term 'attitude' (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1997: 1-2). The general finding that the young people adapted well to work and quickly began to perform work of considerable complexity supports Borman's (1991) view of young workers as resourceful and skilled. A 'deficit' model of young workers is definitely not supported by the research.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Dealing with jobs with low learning potential

The model of potential domains of learning and the way in which they are filtered to form actual domains of learning (Figure 1) can be used to assess the learning potential of jobs available for young people. For each young person and the job he or she enters, the facilitating factors can be examined and potential risks identified. If there is a high degree of risk associated with a particular factor, then the other factors could be examined to assess whether they would compensate for the factor which is unfavourable.

A hypothetical example follows:

A girl leaves school and decides to enter the information technology (IT) industry. This industry has little tradition of training ('industry training tradition') so she might compensate by enrolling herself in a TAFE course in the evenings to maintain her learning ('off-the-job training'), or by joining a company which offers IT traineeships ('government policies and institutional arrangements'). The TAFE course enables her to learn some skills ('technical skills' domain) which are important in the industry but not needed in her current job.

Such intervention, however, would depend upon active involvement by an informed and interested adult, to whom not all young people would have ready access. There are possible policy solutions to

this problem, including the utilisation of existing or new agencies to provide 'learning advice' to all young people starting work, not just those at risk or those entering contracted training.

The case studies indicate that 'juniors' are unlikely to find a reason to enter formal education or training, since at work they are taught all they need to know to do their current jobs; and their learning about the industry and the occupation is relatively modest, so that they may remain unaware of career possibilities. These young workers are most in need of learning advice. A recent report by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (Spierings, 1999) has advocated that early school leavers should be entitled to a bank of 'full-time equivalent education' which they can use to 'purchase' education and training from a variety of sources. The current study shows, however, that advice is needed more than, and certainly as well as, the purchase of training.

Careers advice at school

The study clearly supports previous findings (eg House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1997) that careers advice at school is inadequate. The young people reported that their school careers advisers spent most of their time either organising work experience for younger students, or helping university-bound students choose courses. The majority of young people, who wish to go straight from school to work, are poorly catered for in such a situation. The research indicates that careers advisers need considerable retraining and perhaps that additional careers advisers need to be engaged either in schools or elsewhere. It is possible that such positions could be combined with 'learning adviser' positions as advocated above. The Dusseldorp Skills Forum report (Spierings, 1999) advocates a similar role for what it terms 'transition brokers'.

Training and employment services market

Considering the lack of careers advice available to young people at school, it would appear essential to maintain a network of other reputable organisations which can assist young people find work and access training. In previous years, the Commonwealth Employment Service's Youth Access Centres helped to meet this need. Unfortunately no such network now exists, following the privatisation of the employment services market (Coombe et al, 1999) and the introduction of 'user choice' (KPMG, 1998). Although many organisations have sprung up to meet the markets which have been created, each has its own 'axe to grind'. Subsidies, outcome targets and cost considerations may outweigh genuine concern for young people and their futures. Several of the case studies indicated the difficulties the young people faced in finding out how to access advice about employment and training and where to seek help when things went wrong. Governments therefore need to re-introduce effective employment and training advice and monitoring systems for young people and indeed all workers. These systems need to be separated from any organisations which might stand to make financial gain from any advice which is offered.

Apprenticeships and traineeships

Differences were noted between apprentices, trainees and juniors indicating that the presence and nature of a contract of training influences the richness of young people's learning in their first year of work. The presence and nature of off-the-job training is one of the more important of the facilitating factors listed above. Apprentices and trainees learned more and more deeply than juniors who did not have off-the-job training; moreover, face-to-face off-the-job training was superior to distance education and self-paced learning.

There also appeared to be some differences between apprentices, trainees and juniors, with relation to the amount of learning which was taught, sought or wrought. These differences related not so much to learning how to do the job at hand, since all of the young people were given training (albeit some more systematically and successfully than others) for their daily tasks at work. The differences related rather to learning the occupation and learning about the industry, ie learning for future rather than current needs.

The apprentices learned most from being taught; they learned a moderate amount through incidental learning and sought very little learning for themselves. The trainees were extremely active in seeking out knowledge; on the whole they were taught fairly well, and also extracted quite a lot of learning from their everyday working experiences. Juniors were not taught beyond immediate task-related training, they did not seek learning to a large extent, but learned most through their day-to-day work,

although with varying capacities to reflect on the learning thus gained. The juniors also brought a fair amount of prior learning with them.

The passive nature of the apprentices' learning in the first year may be explained as follows. While apprentices place an emphasis upon learning, and therefore might be expected to seek out their learning more (Lane, 1996) they know that they have three or four years to gain their learning, therefore they are willing to wait and see what they will be taught before they begin to worry about not learning enough. Trainees on the other hand, with only twelve months guaranteed learning, try to gain as much knowledge as possible during that time; thus one trainee in the study referred to her twelve months as 'a kind of extended work experience'. Subsequent years at work might present a different picture, with the apprentices perhaps becoming far more pro-active in seeking out learning.

The research also indicated clear differences between expectations attaching to apprenticeships and traineeships. Apprentices, their parents and their employers were aware of the long tradition involved in apprenticeships (Lane, 1996) and were attracted to them because of that tradition. Apprentices were always interested in the particular occupation. Traineeships, on the other hand, were also valued, but mainly as a stepping-stone to a higher career in the industry, not necessarily the particular occupation.

The findings about differences between apprenticeships and traineeships has some clear implications for policy:

1. The current attempt to conflate apprenticeships and traineeships as New Apprenticeships (eg ANTA, 1999) is flawed and needs to be reversed. Queensland has already refused to use the term (Schofield, 1999). All stakeholders respond well to the two separate terms; and keeping traineeships separate will assist the growth of a distinctive tradition of training in the 'traineeship' industries. The study showed evidence that this was emerging.
2. More consideration needs to be given to what trainees are looking for in their training. The study clearly showed that the comparatively well-educated trainees (all Year 12 leavers) found their studies too easy. They lost respect for the VET system. Training needs to be more rigorous and have more of a theoretical and knowledge base. Moreover, if trainees are looking to articulate into university courses, more attention needs to be paid to making this possible. VET graduates from Training Packages, which are designed to facilitate on-the-job assessment without any teaching or learning component, are likely to be refused credit by universities.
3. On-the-job traineeships are clearly subject to financial and other irregularities (Schofield, 1999). The study shows that it is best for traineeships to have an off-the-job component. There are so many favourable conditions required in order for on-the-job traineeships to succeed that success is perhaps rarely attainable. The two on-the-job traineeships in the study were only 'rescued' at the last minute, and through much of the year it seemed as though neither would gain their certificates.
4. The existence of a contract of training, whether an apprenticeship or a traineeship, appears to affect the expectations of young people, their employers and their parents towards the amount and quality of learning which will be experienced in a job. This is an argument for a further extension of traineeships, but with due regard for quality of employment and training conditions.
5. On-the-job trainees who are part of a whole-workforce cohort, as is common in the food processing and automotive industries (Smith & Smith, 1998), have a different training experience from 'individual' trainees. In these cohorts of trainees, young people have no especial place, and attention may not be given to the learning domains of young people as identified in this study.

Young people's part-time work

Although the majority of school students old enough to work do not yet do so (L. Robinson, 1999), a substantial minority does. This phenomenon is relatively unexplored in policy terms. The young people in the study had generally undertaken quite responsible part-time work, which probably had some effect on their ability to find full-time work comparatively easily, and to adapt to full-time working life. There are some important policy implications of these findings:

1. The Australian government currently takes no interest in the question of access to part-time work, although research in the UK has shown that working-class children and those from ethnic

minorities have difficulty finding such work. If the effects of part-time work upon subsequent full-time employment are positive, then equity considerations suggest intervention of some sort may be appropriate.

2. Current government response to part-time work has been to try to extend part-time traineeships into such work. However the research does not support such an initiative. The young people clearly saw a break between their part-time and their full-time work and would have seen no point to such a scheme. Moreover, most researchers (eg Greenberger, 1988) have found that young people do not eventually work full-time in the industries in which they worked part-time. Therefore a part-time traineeship will generally be of no ultimate value to young people; the general skills and attitudes developed during the part-time employment are far more valuable and do not need 'validation' by a traineeship.
3. Apprentices' and trainees' training providers need to note the considerable skills gained by young people in their part-time work, not necessarily by granting recognition of prior learning, but by acknowledging and utilising these skills during classroom activities. Similarly, employers might benefit from a more explicit acknowledgment of their young full-time employees' past work experience. An assumption appeared to remain that young full-time workers came devoid of previous experience and knowledge.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Some of the findings of this study can be expressed as propositions, each of which could guide further programs of research. Each has implications for Australian policy, but needs research on a wider scale than the current study to support the propositions.

- Proposition 1: There are a number of important differences between apprentices, trainees and juniors relating to learning and training.
- Proposition 2: Off the job training is essential to realise the maximum learning potential of young people's first jobs. It is most valuable when delivered face to face.
- Proposition 3: There is little connection between the part-time work undertaken by young people whilst still at school and the full-time work they eventually go into.
- Proposition 4: The work most young people do by the end of their first twelve months of full-time work is complex and skilled.
- Proposition 5: Most employers have well-developed strategies for supporting young people in their first jobs.
- Proposition 6: A tradition of training is growing in the industries where traineeships are most common.

CONCLUSION

The actual experiences of the group of people for whom entry-level training and school-to-work transition policy are devised indicate a number of flaws in current policy and practice. Although the scale of the research study was limited, the robustness of its findings is a strong argument for qualitative research, particularly in the identification of new variables (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Howe, 1988), the understanding of phenomena in context (Speedy, 1990) and the uncovering of participants' meaning and intent (J.K. Smith & Heshusius, 1986). Policy-makers may, however, prefer findings to be confirmed through larger-scale research. But smaller studies are important as a preliminary to establishing the variables for subsequent larger-scale research.

On a more general level, this paper indicates the potential for research studies to enrich or critique existing literature, to evaluate current policies and practice; and to provide a springboard for further research. Although the links between research and changes in policy cannot always be traced directly, it is certain that without effective research, effective policy is unlikely to be implemented. The area of entry-level training has been subjected to continuous policy change through the 1990s (Smith & Keating, 1997), which has been informed less by empirical research than by insistent lobbying by a limited range of stakeholders. This study and its conclusions provide an example of how a carefully

conceived and executed research project, underpinned by detailed study of relevant literature, can help to inform policy and practice. Many commissioned research projects, and even much research undertaken as a result of the award of competitive grants, are rushed in their execution. PhD research, inevitably more leisured and more reflective, provides the ideal opportunity for such a process.

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