

Wasted skills: The hospitality industry and its young chefs

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Abstract

Rapid changes in industry and the world of work require vocational education training (VET) providers to consider their role in industry skills shortages and how they respond to pressure from government and industry groups to address the need for effective training. This research seeks to throw light on how large training organisations, such as TAFE and industry have responded to government reports on critical skills shortages within the industry (ACTU 2004, July; McKenzie 2004, July). It will seek to probe commercial cookery training (NCVER 2001, June) and the hospitality industry, to ask the question as to what can be done to stem the high turnover of young chefs.

The research will also explore the composition and effectiveness of both formal and informal learning of the trainee combined with the industry and training organisation's capacity to produce long term employment prospects for the trainee to meet the industry's need to retain skilled, productive employees.

What is emerging, from the initial research findings are concerns such as the changing profile of the students now enrolling in apprenticeships and traineeships (they are of all ages) (Karmel 2006) with formal vocational education and workplace training's ability to meet the needs of these new students. Of particular interest, to my research, are the Generation Y (Coupland 1991) trainees who appear to have divergent aims of their learning and employment expectations to their employers and teachers. It has also been reported (Toner 2003, July) that a gap has developed, over the past decade, between the formal training delivered by VET organisations and the training requested by employers, although vocational education providers have endeavored to reduce that gap with a raft of tailored, flexible courses (DEST 2004 December) to meet the needs of employers but not necessarily the trainees.

In conclusion, the research is revealing an industry that, on first view, seems unwilling or unable to fulfill the tripartite training agreement, as employer, with the trainee and their vocational education needs. Initial evidential data shows financial pressure as a common response, in that they have little time or resources to provide adequate workplace training coupled with an historical culture of poor employee dealings and working conditions.

Introduction

This paper will briefly consider three related areas of concern that have so far surfaced from the qualitative research data collected and coded from my research study. They are, firstly, the quality and effectiveness of the situated workplace learning for trainees and its connection to the required knowledge and skills to deliver contextual learning. Secondly, I will sum up the current liberal practices in vocational education that have led the charge of competency training and how it has impacted on the participants of this research. Thirdly I will look at the problematic of changing socio-cultural requirements of trainees and apprentices and possible implications with their learning and impact on motivation to retain employment within the industry.

To begin with I will establish a brief outline of my research, so far, in which I have attempted to discover how practitioners understand the learning needs of trainees in this current climate of skills shortages and the influence of concerned stakeholders. I will place this within a pedagogical context of vocational education and the metaphors of workplace learning which appear to light the way to better understanding but have also revealed flaws in its practice. Linking these two areas of investigation with the coterminous facet of the identity of the apprentice learner and how socio economic factors have impacted to make them different learners from their predecessors and how this difference affects their learning.

The research

This research is investigating the question “Does the current training of chefs impact their high turnover and if so, can training offer solutions to this high turnover?” Following this initial question I asked, “Can vocational education offer more relevance to the trainee and what part does the industry play in the attrition of young chefs?”

Thirteen stakeholders from industry and training organisations, both here and in the UK, including recently graduated trainees, were interviewed with thirty semi-structured questions over the last year. The final questionnaire was developed in two stages with the second stage validating and building on the first stage. The participants’ responses were grounded in practice as they used their own experiences as the basis of their responses.

I purposefully chose the interviewees for maximum variation sampling to select a broad range of stakeholders to achieve a distinct dimension of interest within their particular facet of the industry. The questions allowed for ‘in depth’ probing while keeping the interviewees within the parameters outlined by the aims of the research. They were developed from documented reports (NCVER 2001, June) on the skills shortages and subsequent government recommendations, industry papers responding to current vocational training and conversations with key stakeholders of industry and training. This created an opportunity to take purposeful samples across industry, education and trainees to develop a holistic, information rich and illuminative data to capture complex, interdependencies between participants and the possibly, conflicting needs of the dynamics of industry and pedagogy.

The taped and transcribed interviewing was aimed at capturing participants’ understanding of the hospitality industry in the context of their training experiences linked to the current training needs of commercial cookery apprentices. I believe that this information cannot be described through a linear cause and effect but more importantly needed to be placed within the social, historical and political context of workplace relations in Australia. The interview data and documentary evidence is now being analysed to develop a holistic and context sensitive research.

I positioned the interview responses contextually aligned with the grounded method of analysis to arrive at an understanding based on impressions generated directly from the data. I reasoned that the inductive, bottom-up approach would communicate a more compelling conclusion when revealing answers to Grounded Theory’s assessment of the value of analysis (Strauss 1990)

I have completed the open and axial coding of the data to compare and contrast responses, within the context of the initial question asked in the research, with selective analysis. This is to form an understanding of the evaluation and ground cross-case analysis in the individual studies to identify cross-case patterns and themes in an endeavour to distinguish convergence and divergence in the coding and classifying. Consequently I will need to ask what responses fit together by looking for recurring regularities in the data for these regularities to reveal patterns that can be sorted into categories of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. This paper will report on the initial findings from that empirical, qualitative data which will, eventually, be triangulated with quantitative statistical data and related research literature.

Research Findings

On the first question as to the quality and effectiveness of the trainees' workplace learning the responses differed with the age and position of the interviewee or their role as either employee or employer but all seemed to agree that it was extremely important. Not only for the transfer of skills but also the contextual nature of the learning that it takes place within a group of adults with all the complex interactivities and social dynamics of the workplace (Boud 2001; Lave 1991).

Number one, you are picking up skills, the current skills, the current techniques what is in the industry today. You are also learning how to be in a team environment, how to deal with the team, how to deal with other people's egos in the kitchen environment.
(Pi3, Pi3a, Pi4, Pi4a)

As a young chef learning those things and coping with those things and seeing it (*the industry*) from different perspectives. We've got twenty chefs in our kitchens so that could be twenty different ways that something could be done to achieve the same result. So having that broad knowledge of people around you helps a trainee to grow as a chef.
(Pi6, Pi7, Pi7a)

But rapid changes in technology means training providers must work harder to maintain relevance and currency of knowledge and skills (Cornford 1998) that today's workplace requires workers who are now more than just highly skilled in the traditional, technical sense. It seeks workers who have an array of aptitudes, capabilities and dispositions that move far beyond the vocational knowledge and attitudes as traditionally understood, where the learners become participants, contributors and elaborators of their own knowledge and skills (Chappell 2003a). This changing workplace makes huge demands for new knowledge and adaptability skills from the trainees but the research appears to reveal employers often reflect and lock on their past training experience as the measure by which they evaluate the skills and attitudes of the trainees.

Older style, some of the traditions about cooking, as a chef, it's something you put passion in and you want to learn as much as possible. These days we get lost a little bit and try to get the chefs to come out with some skills that are

probably not necessary. I find that with some of the chefs here (*they*) really get a buzz out of learning some of the older skills, more traditional type of cooking, so that's what I'd like to see focused on a little bit.

(Pa1, Pa1a, Pa2, Pa3, Pa4)

Organisations also need to be responsive to the changing needs of workers through flatter more flexible structures (ILO 2002) as well as allowing the workers opportunity to be able to respond in flexible ways as new techniques are introduced, new collaborations formed and new competitive challenges faced that; *'a workforce that is flexible and adaptable, resilient, innovative, with the capacity to learn to learn and work with others are commonly described as having some of the core attributes critical to effectiveness'*

(Chappell 2003a)

Learning in the workplace

The research showed that the workplace environment is not always conducive to effective learning as critical staffing levels indicated that time taken to train young employees is minimal and cursory. So it raises the question concerning the exploration of other models of training to provide a more *'meaningful and contextual' learning linked to the employer's expectations* (McIntyre 1993) (Brookfield 1986)

Saying that, one employer voiced little support for the effectiveness of formal workplace competency evaluations as ineffectual compared to an apprentice attending a VET institution. He believed that he and other managers and supervisors don't have the time to train an apprentice with all the skills and knowledge necessary and that some of his colleagues didn't have the skills or ability. Overall the responses from the research from all participants as to the quality of current workplace training, was negative.

The apprentices need to work in an environment where they can actually, physically learn and not be the one doing the teaching.

That's where the problem is that a lot of apprentices these days are in an environment where they are expected to teach and have the knowledge to run a kitchen instead of being an apprentice

(Pi11b, Pi11c, Pi11d)

Some employers preferred to take on experienced, but ostensibly untrained employees and then orientate them to their, particular, customer needs as a cheaper alternative to long term training which is a common experience with other industries and trades where there is a shortage of skilled staff. Industries such as electrical trades (Worland 2003) and the printing industry (Callan 2007) have attempted different solutions to their shortage such as an increase in the reliance of technology but this still doesn't address the long term concerns with vocational training and employment prospects for Australian workers.

You get to the point that no one is actually training the trainers. So you are losing that side of it. (Pj11) I could go on all day how bad, there was no training it was almost self-training, you had to learn things yourself, go away and do that, come up with a menu (Pj11a, Pj11b) I don't have a high opinion of a lot of them (*employers*), I don't know them personally, and I don't think a

lot of them spend enough time with these apprentices (Pj17, Pj3a) I also think we still have a culture of aggression in the industry and not such a strong culture of supporting and training apprentices, I still think it's a bit of a slave labour culture. (Pj23)

It is clear that there are limitations in preparing learners for a changing workplace, where there is a fundamental need to adapt to changing processes, new materials, work structures and environments, therefore limiting the vocational education to specific procedures are ineffective in understanding the tasks at hand. Moreover epistemological literature declares that an individual's characteristics, their disposition, motivation and interest (Billett 1996; Prawat 1989, Spring; Tobias 1994, Spring) is clearly integral to the ways in which they learn to perform tasks and is therefore also integral to understanding how knowledge and skills is constructed in the workplace.

Neo-liberal changes to vocational education

The changes in current Vocational Education and Training (VET) students, which can, in part, be traced to the delivery of the National Training Reform Agenda and the 1992 'New Apprenticeship and Training Schemes in Technical and Further Education' (TAFE) has had an important impact on training. TAFE once had a monopoly over the supply of training to young school-leavers but the freeing up of vocational training brought about by the National Training Agenda with more avenues for VET has meant that TAFE now competes in the local and global vocational education market place. (NCVER 2000c) Furthermore the formal requirements for off-the-job training in apprenticeships have been more relaxed since 1994 which has augmented more flexible ways in which training is delivered through training packages (Misko 2001; Smith 2002). There has been an increasing recognition of the role of experience and prior learning which has attracted a large percentage of adults to return to training, to either upgrade or improve their skills, or to gain formal qualifications (Karmel 2006)

This more open and equitable intake has dramatically changed the profile of the student body in VET apprenticeships and traineeships in that they are now accessible to people of all ages and are no longer restricted, in the main, to school leavers. Almost one third of 'new' apprentices are 25 years of age or over (NCVER 2000a) which means students, in the main, now have a greater expectation of their teachers than in previous times due to an awareness of their rights as learners (Pithers 2002)

Also the quality of training plays a significant role in an apprentice's decision to continue or withdraw from training (Snell 2007) which would lead us to assume that individual teachers must also take responsibility for their continual learning by remaining current, not only with industry changes but also new epistemologies in adult learning. A general criticism leveled at some VET teachers, by educational writers, is a perceived dependence on undergraduate learning to carry them through their teaching career and their limited exposure to new developments in educational paradigms.

Furthermore industry groups are now requesting that other 'soft' skills are to be taught (DEST 2004) to enhance and maintain the trainee's employability such as

communication, team work, problem solving, self-management, planning and organising, technology, learning, and initiative and enterprise. They are seen, by employers, to be as important as practical skills in that they provide the necessary knowledge for the trainee to operate successfully in the workplace.

A significant change in the TAFE environment is that it is now teaching experienced adults who are keen to obtain maximum benefit from a chosen course, and who request more relevant and accessible information than their younger counterparts. Flexibility, teamwork, continuous learning and employee participation and development may be descriptors applicable to the new teacher/student relationship as both benefit from these changes(Garavan 1997)

I think TAFE has a lot to offer in the sense of, you get more of the reasons why you use certain things but I don't think TAFE has the opportunity to use the products that restaurants have
(Pd6, Pd7)

They can learn them in a TAFE environment, on the job, in actual fact, when you look at an apprenticeship most of the training occurs in the work place because they come to TAFE one day a week. I think there is probably a need for TAFE to go out into industry to do workplace training on the job.
(Pd1a, Pd9, Pd7a)

However not all responses were positive as recently graduated student interviewee had a strongly negative opinion of her VET training and its ability to replicate her experience of the workplace.

Definitely not, I'm sorry but with cutting corners, or only having the time to learn certain cuisines in a (limited) time period with the teacher to student ratio (16-1) I don't believe that option is always available.
(Pd10, Pd7b)

Competency based training

Research evidence suggests that competency based training CBT modular courses implemented in VET, as result of federal government pressures, are not resulting in students with superior knowledge and skills (Cornford 1997) In fact there has been criticism of current VET policies and CBT to meet Australia's skills needs (DEST 2005, February) (Cornford 2004; Hawke 2002 June) that there has been a decline in standards in some trade areas subsequent to its introduction. (Mills 2002)

Most CBT training packages do not encourage development of critical thinking skills so needed to cope with the changing nature of the modern workplace and effective problem solving asserted by employers as desirable. It is not achievable unless there is a sound theoretical underpinning of knowledge and that competency standards only represent desired outcomes and they do not offer any great guidance to teachers.

The socio-cultural dynamics of training

The changing nature of the new trainee is even less likely to accept many of the working conditions employers see as part of the traditional culture of the workplace. An increase in women to the trade, older, more work wise trainees (Karmel 2006 ; NCVER 2000a) and the new generation of school leavers and *generation Y* have different expectations of their work life than the traditional male school leaver a decade ago.

I look at my group of friends growing up and a few of them started off as chefs. Once they saw other friends getting into IT, earning loads of money and getting regular hours I know a lot of my friends just dropped out and went into computing and IT. You can't really glamorise it too much. They'll come in and see the reality and then drop out.

(Pz1, Pz2)

Moreover being a trainee in, what is essentially a very tough environment can create doubts as to the value of the pain and sacrifice demanded by the workplace. This new knowledge learning involves altering existing ideas or schemas an individual has constructed in his or her mind (Festinger 1957; Sund 1976) that when learning involves the changing of values and attitudes, the period of dissonance can be even more stressful. This additional stress occurs as learning affects and challenges the identity of the individual and they question their core understanding of their world to become new workers and take on the attributes of the workplace.

I guess I now only understand what I learn from that experience because I was a lot younger and a bit rebellious, forced into it by my parents. I guess I was a little but negative about the whole deal the hours, working from midnight to midday, watching my friends go partying and having to go to work (also) relationship troubles because of the hours. I guess I resented a lot of it but now, nearly ten years later, I'm really grateful for what I learnt there but I'm only starting to understand that now.

(Ph12, Ph3b, Ph3c, Ph3d)

Generation Y

Generation Y (Coupland 1991) or the Millennials have lived through the age of the internet and there is an old adage that says, *People resemble their times more than they resemble their parents*. Born between 1982-2000 and make up 28% of the population.(ABS 2001) this generation has observed their parents get the rewards of hard work: houses, cars and material wealth and they have benefited by being the most materially endowed, and entertained generation of teenagers ever, yet they have seen the costs of their parents' success in terms of broken marriages, absentee parenting, and an epidemic of stress related illnesses.

For their part Gen Y have been left disillusioned with the materialism they have enjoyed and boredom remains a big problem for them (57%) state that "never being bored" is of highest importance to them. (McCrinkle 2006) When deciding to accept a job, salary ranks sixth in order of importance after training, management style, work flexibility, staff activities, and non-financial rewards. (McCrinkle 2001) The young

people of this generation do not live to work but rather work to live and a job merely provides the income to do what they want to do which is search for fun, for quality friendships, for a fulfilling purpose (McCrindle 2001)

Past training has mainly focused on VET and industry requirements and trainees were expected to accept that as a normal process but skills shortages and attracting young people back to trades has meant that new thinking is needed. Mentorship programs have recently been implemented (TAFE NSW) for female trainee chefs to support their workplace training is a hugely positive leap in an industry renowned for sexism and bullying. A similar program is also being piloted at Westminster College in London to support trainees and employers in the trainee's transition into the workplace.

We are also involved, and at this stage it's for female apprentice chefs in their 2nd and 3rd years, a mentoring program. So the aim of that is to stay in training within the industry and also to aspire to some of the higher level positions in the industry, that you don't see too many chefs in.

(Pn19, Pn19a)

There are questions, in the research, concerning the working conditions of hospitality employees that have impacted overtly on the trainees' ability or willingness to continue their apprenticeship and consequently stay in the industry. These responses related to low wages and working hours and the fact that this is, in part, a late night entertainment industry with all the temptations to a young trainee in his or her first job.

But it's no different to when I was an apprentice because there are more options now because that's what we did, we went out after work, like at 11 o'clock at night after a really, really busy night, you are on a high, you don't know how to come down, so you have a few drinks.

(Pz8, Pz9)

Where I think it has changed more than when I was an apprentice is drugs are more available. You can get all different types, more easily to get, It is sold in kitchens nowadays because they sell it for a living as well.

(Pz6)

Moreover the question has been raised as to whether there really is a skills shortage as reported or that sufficient numbers of trained individuals are being trained but are eventually choosing to opt out of physically demanding industries such as hospitality or nursing (Richardson 2007). Another factor could be the increase in demand for workers as businesses increase and their inability to employ sufficient staff impacting current statistics on skills shortages. These will also form points of consideration in the analysis for the final thesis.

Conclusion

The effectiveness of formal vocational learning setting in the classroom/educational process may be viewed as a means to impart meaningful experiences to both teachers and students alike. But although it is able to deliver a breadth of knowledge it cannot respond to the specific depth needed by individual learners for their workplace, this

can only be accomplished in the dynamic environment of the trainee and their workplace learning. Several studies of workers within the informal learning of the workplace concluded that effective learning resulted from learners' engagement in authentic activities, guided by experts and interacting with other learners (Billett 1993, 1994b). However although understanding was unique to each individual, it was shaped by his or her workplace culture and that the quality of information was important but nonetheless it needed to be delivered at their level (Billett 1994b). This research has shown that, although industry reports have leveled doubts as to the effectiveness of the formal VET setting, it has been unable or unwilling to fulfill its part of the trainees' agreement to provide effective workplace training. It is also asking for flexible, creative employees who can think for themselves with a range of employability skills but they seem to lack the flexibility and creativity expected of their employees. They want more holistic, social, 'soft' skills in their trainees but are demanding shorter, more practice based cost effective courses. Classroom settings can support authentic knowledge acquisition for learners but they cannot replicate every specific workplace scenario as this can only be achieved on site. VET can offer a broad range of industry choices for a trainee but can really only skim the tree tops of knowledge and hope the depth of the trainees experience is achieved in their workplace. It appears that more focus needs to be on the individual and their ability to cope in demanding work environments, to *facilitate construction of knowledge through experiential, contextual and social methods in real world environments* (Lynch 1997) and support them in the new workplace with their active construction of knowledge (Stevenson 1994)

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