

Social construction of skill viewed through the lens of training for the cleaning industry

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Social construction of skill

- Skill is a slippery concept
- Positivist/technicist views of skill
- Social construction of skill – labour process theory and feminist approaches



Research method

- Part of 2007-8 NCVER project on quality in traineeship (Smith, Comyn, Brennan Kemmis & Smith)

- Cleaning industry case study:

8 interviews with Skills Council (CPSISC), employer and employee associations, public RTO, enterprise RTO, commercial RTO, GTO with cleaning enterprise (BSL)

Company example: 'Bill Saunders' manager, 2 workers and partnering RTO (a TAFE Institute)

Cleaning industry

- Turnover of \$2 billion p.a. (1999-latest ABS detailed report);
- Workforce of 95,000;
- Three large companies and a preponderance of small companies and sole proprietors;
- Technology development rapid though take-up is uneven;
- DEWR report 2006 found recruitment difficulties-quality and quantity;
- Two employer associations BSCC & ACCA; main union is LHMWU.

Training

- Asset Maintenance (Cleaning Operations) certificates- I studied Cert III;
- 5 core units and 14 electives;
- Often needs to be customised for workers from NESB or low literacy levels;
- Delivery is partly on the job but off the job component considered essential for quality and to preserve dignity;
- In some cases government funding unavailable for traineeships;
- Some RTOs were expert in the area while others were almost completely ignorant.

What skills and knowledge are needed in cleaning?

- ... *the equipment that is out there now, the responsibilities and security factors – these cleaners are locking up multi-storey buildings and banks with guards and a lot of responsibility*
- *People are getting very, very ill in this industry. The chemicals we use can kill people..*
- *This is an area where obviously OH&S has such a big impact – correct movement, correct bending techniques, and using heavy equipment*

A tale of two attitudes

Two TAFE managers

- *we're probably getting more and more out there now than a lot of other areas. we're one of the – what would we call it – bigger players probably in the trades as far as student contact hours go, and our numbers go. ('Regional Public')*
- *We're not talking about something that's a critical occupation, an important one, we are not talking about someone who is doing something that's fundamental to human health and safety for example, so ... I'm not sure there's any major gain in this type of thing. ('State Public')*

What about the workers?

- 'False consciousness' – a Marxist term here used to discuss why cleaning workers perceive their jobs as low skilled and that they have little power in their careers
- *A lot of these traineeships are you know, targeting a blue collar audience... like someone who's been a cleaner... for 5, 10 years, but there's been no formal recognition of what they've done, and ... they **see themselves as just a cleaner**. The recognition that what they're doing actually does have some value somewhere in an educational framework, has made them feel... just a lot more prouder about what they do, in themselves, with their self esteem ... just to see people who may have never enjoyed an educational accolade in their whole life, this is a big deal for them and it's really special and it's really nice to see that and to see that pride, and the fact that **something they've done has got a perceived value** now that may not have had before, or they didn't think had before. ('Big Clean' traineeship manager)*

'Bill Saunders' case study

- The two workers were grateful to their manager for employing them;
- They only thought about further training in terms of being asked by their manager;
- They did not rate cleaning itself highly (perhaps because they had low self-esteem);
- The qualification was entered into 'by accident' – as part of the job - rather than purposefully.

More details

- Smith, E., Comyn, P., Brennan Kemmis, R. & Smith, A. (forthcoming, July 2009). *High quality traineeships: identifying what works*. Adelaide: NCVET.
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