

A RECIPE FOR CHANGE: MANAGING THE LEARNING OF TRAINEE/APPRENTICE CHEFS AT WORK

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Abstract

The commercial cookery field attracts high numbers of both young apprentices and older worker trainees each year. On- the-job training is a significant component of the chef traineeship/apprenticeship. The requirement for workplaces to provide workplace training is generally well understood by trainee/apprentices and employers. However, what is often less well understood is how supervisors of commercial cookery trainee/apprentices actually create effective and appropriate on-the-job learning opportunities for apprentices. How supervisors address the often diverse needs of learners with the needs of the employer and, at the same time, balance these with the contractual on-the-job training and learning requirements of trainee/apprentices also needs further inquiry to complement current understandings.

This paper presents preliminary findings from a recent case study exploring trainee/apprentice chef learning in the context of a number of large fine dining restaurants in Sydney. The paper looks at how supervising chefs create learning opportunities for trainee/apprentice chefs at work and some of the issues influencing the learning relationship between the trainee/apprentice chef and the supervising chef. The study builds on previous work in the fields of traineeship and apprenticeship learning and is framed by workplace and situated learning principles.

Introduction

This paper develops a collaborative analysis of key findings from data drawn from the first stage of an ongoing research project (McDermott 2008) on early attrition of trainee/apprentice chefs who discontinued their apprenticeship and employment in the first two years of their apprenticeship contract. The genesis of this research was the recent and much publicised issue of industry skills shortages and changes to the way training is delivered in Vocational Education and Training (VET) organisations. The research took a broad approach by asking questions about the industry culture and its stakeholders, the current social context for the apprentice and how that informs and affects their workplace learning and employment satisfaction. The research also looked at how and in what ways a VET organisation influences apprentice on-the-job training and learning.

Aims and Objectives of this study

The purpose of this paper is to present preliminary findings from a research project looking at the influences of managing /supervising chefs on the learning of apprentice chefs in the context of a number of fine dining establishments located in Sydney,

NSW. The study inquires into the role of the supervising chef in facilitating the workplace learning of apprentice and trainee chefs and shed some light on how supervising chefs establish and create a learning conducive environment for apprentice chefs.

This paper focuses on the influence of the supervising chef on trainee and apprentice chef retention in the context of fine dining establishments in Sydney. The study looks at ways in which supervising chefs create learning conducive conditions for trainee and apprentice chefs and how these conditions translate into on-the-job workplace satisfaction and apprentice retention. It combines previous studies looking at apprentice chef retention rates (McDermott 2008) and manager roles as facilitators of workplace learning (Carter 2009). For the purposes of this paper, trainee and apprentice chefs are acknowledged as having a number of different training arrangements in their contracts but will be referred to here generically as ‘apprentices’ denoting ‘early experience learners’. The term ‘apprentice chef’, is taken to mean a ‘first’ or ‘second’ year apprentice chef. Apprentice chefs in this study are indentured to an employer for a period of 3 years. Employers in this study are businesses classified as ‘fine dining establishments’ in Sydney NSW. The term ‘manager’ is taken to mean the workplace supervisor or manager working closely with apprentices in their everyday work.

In this paper we argue that apprentice engagement in work and training, satisfaction and subsequent apprenticeship retention are significantly influenced by the role and actions of the workplace manager and the context of the working environment. We also argue that the role of the supervising chef as a facilitator of on-the-job learning deserves further inquiry to build understanding for not only supervising chefs, but also for learners, trainers and employers. Specifically, more needs to be known about how apprenticeship learning is influenced by the practice and culture promoted by the supervising chef.

In this paper we propose that learning at, in and through work is a process and an outcome of both the employment relationship that is ‘what workers are expected to do’ and the way workers involve themselves in the process of meeting their obligations to the employment relationship. As work in the new age of change becomes less prescriptive and more diversified, particularly with the introduction of new technologies and competitive processes, workers and managers need to be able to adapt old and develop new skills so that they can maintain their own viability and keep up with the pace of change.

The catalyst for this combined research was a shared interest by both of us in how learning at work is facilitated and supported and an observation that the retention rate of apprentice and trainee chefs in employment and training has been gradually falling in recent years. More needs to be known about the training conditions for apprentice chefs in commercial kitchens.

Apprentices and their apprenticeship

An apprenticeship or traineeship contract involves a tripartite agreement between the Registered Training Authority, RTO and employer and a learner . The requirements of a NSW State Government apprenticeship/ traineeship contract is that a learner be

indentured to an employer and enrol in an apprenticeship learning program, generally at a Certificate III level, with an RTO such as TAFE NSW. The role of the RTO is to provide formal training through course work including theory and practice in a training environment. The role of the employer is to provide suitable on-the-job learning opportunities for apprentices to complement training provided by the RTO. The role of the apprentice is to participate at an appropriate level of engagement with formal training, and in work as an apprentice and employee.

Employers are responsible for providing meaningful, useful and authentic work tasks and to create opportunities for apprentices to extend their experience to prepare them for subsequent stages of the apprenticeship and future employment. In considering the roles of workplace 'trainers' in facilitating on-the-job learning, it is important to consider that on-the-job learning and training encompasses more than the development of technical chef skills. Learning in the context of work also includes negotiation of the social, cultural and physical conditions which shape the work environment. Responsibility for on-the-job guidance and supervision which would usually be provided by the supervising chef often falls to a 3rd year apprentice. This raises questions not only for the nature of 'on-the-job' learning and training for first and second year apprentices but also for the on the job training and learning for third year apprentices. Are third year apprentices adequately equipped to not only coordinate their own work and learning but also to 'train' and support less experienced apprentice chefs? And 'what is meant by the terms 'training' and 'learning' in the context of on-the-job workplace learning for apprentice chefs?

Workplaces as sites of learning

Workplaces can be sites of rich learning for many workers. Indeed, as (Billett 2001) points out, workplaces are sometimes the only place for workers to build their vocational knowledge. In examining guided learning at work, Billett (2001) however suggests that workplaces can be places of unequal distribution of opportunities for further learning. As such, it is important to look not only at how learning at work is guided by others but also to explore how the workplace affords learning and the 'agency' of individuals, that is, worker learner employment status, motivation and interests. Further, Billett (2001) proposes that contributions from worker engagement in everyday work can be supplemented with three elements that would make up a workplace pedagogy.

The three elements are:

1. intentional structuring of work and provision of guidance
2. acknowledgement of different kinds of affordances of access to activities and how workers engage with these and the type of support they can secure, and
3. encourage full bodied engagement in learning activities, the type of which develops robust knowledge.

In acknowledging that learning through workplaces requires more than just guidance, the kinds of values, goals and activities located in the workplace are also likely to determine how learning proceeds, what is learned and who is invited to participate (Billett 2001). Situated workplace learning sees learning as taking place in response

to how the workplace encourages participation, provides challenging tasks and access to guidance by experienced others (Billett 2000, 2004, 2006). In a situated workplace learning model, learners learn through engagement with the activities of the workplace. A situated learning model suggests that learning is afforded by the 'situation' or context of the workplace and that responsibility for workplace learning rests not only with the learner, but how learning opportunities are afforded by the workplace.

The culture of the workplace has been found to have a significant influence on the way learning at work is perceived, acknowledged and supported (Solomon in Fenwick 2001). The multiple and divergent interests in how learning is constructed in the context of the workplace makes workplace learning a complex process which is sometimes not well understood by workers or managers.

Learning facilitation and how it applies to apprenticeship learning

Facilitation practices include 'hands on' facilitation techniques such as mentoring, coaching and guiding (Billett 2000). A guiding principle in mentoring is that it is a targeted intentional matter that requires a specific focus, time, interest and appreciation of individuals. Mentors ideally, need to be able to research and carefully select their mentees and continually and constantly affirm activities (Johnson & Ridley 2004). Mentoring, coaching and guiding are, typically, planned, structured and intentional strategies that require time and resources to plan and implement. However, these types of strategies are often considered by employers as informal processes, unintentional and ad hoc, requiring few resources to implement and manage. These divergent views on facilitation techniques raise questions about how these processes are actually understood and implemented in practice and how these types of activities are resourced in workplace settings. The roles of managers as facilitators of learning at work can influence not only the way workplaces afford learning opportunities but also how workers engage with the opportunities created through work and the workplace (Billett 2002).

An important role is played by the line manager in promoting a positive learning environment for informal learning within their work teams (Macneil 2001). Further, supervisors who are effective facilitators will utilise their own learning and interpersonal skills to encourage informal learning opportunities through knowledge sharing thus improving team performance (Macneil 2001). An effective facilitator is able to switch continuously between 'one to one', 'one to many' and 'one to all' learning strategies (Heron 1989). As a facilitator, the manager or supervising chef is positioned to play an important and complex role in building awareness of individual worker learner needs and to deploy a wide range of learning strategies to build experience for apprentices. However, while managers may accept their roles as facilitators of workplace learning, the organization of work, time and resources can inhibit their approaches, and as such, can constrain the process of deploying useful learning strategies (Carter 2009).

Research method

Semi structured interviews were conducted with supervising chefs and apprentice chefs working in a number of fine dining restaurants in Sydney, NSW. Semi structured interviews were also conducted with a number of VET teachers.

Participants were asked a series of open ended questions about how they see the current state of the commercial cookery industry. In addition to this, apprentices and employers were asked their opinions about current VET training curriculum and workplace training practices. Employers who had also been apprentice chefs in the early stages of their careers were asked how the current state of the commercial cookery industry and VET training compares with their experience of being an apprentice chef before the industry and VET training underwent significant changes.

The research sought to examine commercial cookery training within the hospitality industry to develop an understanding of the workplace and vocational training of apprentice/ trainees. In recent years a large percentage of commercial cookery apprentices and trainees have chosen to drop out from both formal training and the commercial cookery industry (NCVER 2001). The data on current training of commercial cookery apprentices and trainees in the food industry and employer expectations was developed as a comparative study to ask the question as to how VET and workplace training is concomitant with the needs of both apprentice and employer (Cornford & Gunn 1998). The data for this research was generated by an inductive, interpretive approach of analysis to search for areas of homogeneity or heterogeneity between VET training and training provided by the workplace.

Examination of both the formal training and workplace training components the apprentices' learning processes was intended to shed light on a possible nexus between training in the workplace and VET and the skills shortage within the industry (NCVER 2001). We analysed the interviews and documents looking for evidence of where participants felt that the VET training they received tended to complement or otherwise, the on-the-job training they received from their supervising chefs. We also looked for ways in which the three parties, employer, trainer and apprentice could be brought together in the future to collaboratively discuss their differing perspectives and possible ways to improve on-the-job training experiences for apprentices.

Findings and discussion from the initial case study on early attrition

Themes identified from the data and which are discussed here relate to apprentice perceptions of satisfaction with on-the-job training, work conditions and employer obligations in apprentice training contracts.

The research found that the quality of training within the workplace setting is a major determinant of apprentice satisfaction with both work and training. Perceptions of training quality significantly influenced decisions made by apprentices to 'stay on' in the industry to complete their apprenticeship or drop out of the industry altogether.

Research findings concerning apprentice retention in other industries also suggest that that a key driver for skills retention and utilisation is that people stay in organisations in which they 'feel they are learning and progressing in their careers' (Smith et al 2008). A person's relationship with their boss/supervisor was found to be an important predictor of worker intention to quit (Gow et al. 2008) . This notion is

supported by a Head Chef in a large fine dining restaurant who indicated that good supervising chefs can nurture and support apprentices or less experienced chefs by affording encouragement and praise when deserved. He suggested that:

Good chefs can tell quite quickly at what level you're at and how much responsibility they can give you. They can nurture that. They'll know how quickly to move you up or stay on a certain section before you move to a new section. Working with you encouraging you, not making you feel special everyday but when you do something good then taking the time out to say, 'well done', not being scared to pass on their knowledge. Filippo (Head Chef)

The commercial cookery industry harbours a significant number of employers who have difficulty in fulfilling base expectations of the tripartite training agreement between the trainee, employer and VET (McDermott 2008). The contractual agreement of employing an apprentice and the apprenticeship funding subsidy, paid by the Federal Government, carries with it obligations on the part of the employer to provide training for the apprentice. However, while the employer is responsible for providing meaningful on-the-job training for trainee/ apprentices, observations in commercial cookery kitchens (McDermott 2008) suggest that employers have varied perceptions of how this training is supervised. Training supervision in commercial kitchens is often delegated, not to senior chefs, but rather, to 3rd Year or 4th Year apprentices who may not necessarily have adequate experience in supervising inexperienced 1st Year apprentices. One of many implications of this is that apprentices in both 1st and later years apprentices often feel that on-the-job training they receive is inadequate or does not meet their expectations of quality. As two apprentice chefs noted:

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

And

I could go on all day how bad – there was no training it was almost self-training. You had to learn things yourself. Patrick

On the other hand the study also found that several of the more experienced apprentice chefs indicated interest and satisfaction in 'looking after' new apprentices and that they were learning to be 'responsible' for less experienced apprentices.

A large number of small employers and some large employers too, have found it very difficult to juggle the requirements of their business and allocate adequate time to support apprentice on-the-job training. Employers seem content to send their apprentices to a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) such as TAFE but spent little time following up the formal training with on-the-job training for apprentices at work.

I think the TAFE gives people a solid grounding but I think it's up to the employer to finish off that grounding...it depends on the skills that are needed for them to do their job at their place of work...because a lot of places of work are very different. Russell (Teacher)

Moreover our research confirmed that some participants thought the limited or reduced level and quality of apprentice workplace training was largely due to economic pressures on the employer. Reductions in staffing levels was also a cause for a deficit of time and personnel available to provide adequate on-the-job training. Supervising chefs noted the effect of the current economic environment on changes in staffing arrangements in hotels. One chef stated that they felt:

'...(there has been a) massive change because hotels 20 years ago would have 70 staff. Today there is 35 staff in the hotel. It's cut in half, because the outsourcing is available'. Heather (Head Chef)

A vigorously hierarchical and regimented staff structure permeates much of kitchen life particularly within large commercial kitchens. The environment of a large commercial kitchen can sometimes provide few opportunities for apprentices to build their confidence and skills through practice or trial and error. The often inflexible behaviour of the managing chef and supervisor (Head Chef) is likely to build fear and anxiety, overriding the apprentice's ability to learn and question (Cornford & Gunn 1998).

The traditional structure of a kitchen is one where the Head Chef would determine the ontogeny of events from menus to rosters. There would also be a brigade of senior supervisors such as second chefs and section chefs who would all have specific duties and responsibilities answerable to the Head Chef who would oversee the whole operation. First year apprentice chefs operate at the beginning or entry level in commercial kitchens of all sizes and tend to be vested with low level routine work such as chopping and cleaning which, although unstimulating and unrewarding, offers some participation within the team. However, at the entry level, apprentice chefs with little experience also tend to be 'pushed around' by chefs at higher levels in the hierarchy in the often frenetic and emotionally charged environment of a busy fine dining restaurant kitchen. If apprentices are able to withstand this type of workplace environment they are given increasingly more complex responsibilities during the period of their apprenticeship. This tends to occur until they achieve a level of skill and autonomy comparable with many of their more qualified colleagues.

The learning of an apprentice chef is strongly influenced by a number of issues relating to organisational objectives and the workplace culture established by the supervising chef. The nature of training afforded by a commercial kitchen is often driven by the purpose of the establishment. Large standard menu fine dining restaurants often generate standard menus and standard practices which become repetitive and unstimulating for apprentice and supervising chefs alike. On the other hand, smaller fine dining establishments, with 'blackboard' menus and 'daily specials' are able to more readily create an environment where apprentices and supervising chefs alike can vary food preparation, cooking techniques and plate presentation. While some fine dining establishments also create opportunities for apprentices to develop their creativity in kitchens, this can be influenced by a number of other issues such as the business directions and culture of the managing organisation.

Snell and Hart (2007) reported on apprentices in other industries that the main issues expressed by apprentices and trainees as contributing to their non-completion or dissatisfaction with their apprenticeship/traineeship were:

- Being treated as cheap labour
- Lack of appropriate supervision in the workplace
- Problems with poor or inappropriate training
- Bullying and abuse in the workplace
- Low wages

The contribution workplaces make to authentic and meaningful learning for the workers and others has been extensively theorised and presented as significant (Lave & Wenger 1991). However, workplaces in themselves are not neutral territories for negotiating communities of practice and can abound with historical subjectivity for both the learner and their employer as to how learning opportunities are afforded to apprentices. Learners are becoming more responsible for what and how they learn. The focus of workplace learning is not just developing skills but developing people (Chappell 2003). While the learner is a key player in determining his or her learning strategy (Chappell 2003) and (Billett 2002), workplace managers also play roles in fostering and facilitating the learning of their staff (Bierema & Eraut 2004; Carter 2009). It is important to note that individual learning strategies are, however, likely to be constrained by what is possible in the workplace rather than what would be ideal for learners (Chappell 2003).

In a study of manager roles in facilitating learning for others at work, managers were found to deploy a range of workplace learning strategies for their teams but their facilitation role tended to be constrained by time and resources (Carter, 2009). As such, work related learning strategies tended in some cases to lack planning, and tended to be ad hoc and reactive to immediate training needs rather than reflect a longer term plan for work related learning.

Why an apprentice chef would ‘drop out’ of the commercial cookery industry.

The study indicates that apprentice chef retention rates are strongly influenced by employment conditions and the relationship apprentices have with their supervising chef. When 3rd year apprentices were asked about the work environment and why they thought earlier year apprentice chefs drop out an apprenticeship and employment, they indicated that a key issues is the way apprentice chefs are treated in the workplace. This is illustrated by a 3rd year apprentice who responded that:

‘You see the way some chefs treat younger people in the industry and I think that puts a lot of people off’. Tim

In discussing job satisfaction and decisions about ‘staying on’ to complete apprenticeships, apprentice chefs indicated that support from their supervising chef was a key influence. The changing nature of work, smaller teams and the cost of managing commercial kitchens in recent years has meant that supervising chefs are often required to be more involved with ‘hands on’ cooking and additional administrative work and less apprentice supervision. These changes have seen a shift

in some of the on-the-job responsibilities move from supervising chef to later year (3rd year) apprentice chefs. The changes have also included some devolution of responsibility for apprentice training from supervising chef to 4th and 3rd Year apprentices. As one 3rd year apprentice chef indicated

'...apprentices are expected to have the knowledge to run a kitchen instead of being an apprentice'. Christoph

Supervising chefs also indicated that their roles in facilitating apprentice chefs to learn at work are important in developing relevant and useful skills in apprentices however acknowledged that being an on-the-job 'trainer' can be a challenging process and a somewhat problematic task. As an experienced supervising chef said:

'...training is a skill and some chefs in their industry have training skills whereas others are not so good'. Dan

and

'You've got to have a good teacher'...you can't have an impatient 'so and so' who just thinks you (apprentices) are a slave'. Jim

Influences on apprentice chef retention

The role of the line manager in facilitating learning for others at work is complex and challenging. A range of socio-cultural conditions and the way work is organised in commercial kitchens act to influence the way work is allocated to apprentices and the way they are often treated by others at work. The role and culture (behaviours) of the supervising chef also influence the way opportunities for on-going learning are afforded to apprentices. While supervising chefs accept that part of their role is to be a 'workplace trainer' they are often not adequately equipped or trained for this role.

The hierarchical nature of staffing in commercial kitchens and the nature of the work in fine dining restaurants means that supervisors and apprentices are required to contend simultaneously with an established hierarchical kitchen culture yet develop innovative ways to meet changing customer demands and manage the immediacy of producing high quality cuisine. One apprentice explained that besides the hierarchy there is also the issue of supervising chef expectations and 'how' chef work should be done in the kitchen. To illustrate:

'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'. Sally

Time and resources for attending to apprentice learning through on-the job learning tend to be limited and as such, supervising chefs can often, be constrained in providing useful on-going learning opportunities for apprentices.

While supervising chefs acknowledged their expected roles in providing on-going workplace learning for apprentices, they frequently discussed on-going learning in terms of 'training' and acting as task allocators rather than acting as 'mentors, coaches or guides'. As learning facilitators, supervising chefs require a different range of skills to foster ongoing learning through work compared to the role of a workplace trainer. This has implications for how vocational training is organised for

later year apprentices and whether or not the formal component of the apprenticeship training delivered by an RTO is adequate for preparing apprentices to become both workplace ‘trainers’ and facilitators of ongoing workplace learning. It also has implications for how apprentices receive their on-the-job guidance and consequently their satisfaction with work and training.

Apprenticeships and traineeships that involve a combination of off-the-job and on-the-job training whereby practical skills and an underpinning knowledge about these skills are developed is seen as the most effective form vocational training (Schofield 1999; Smith 1999; Strickland et al. 2001). Where the apprentice receives all their training in the workplace there are questions as to the ‘breadth’ and quality of their learning outcomes (Bowman, Stanwick & Blythe 2005). The underpinning knowledge is crucial for developing transferable skills in the apprentice which offers the capacity to apply their learning to a much broader range of tasks than prescribed by that particular workplace. Apprentices and trainees prefer a mix of on and off-the-job training whereby they will be learning a diversity of skills and will receive some level of support throughout their training (Strickland et al. 2001). Apprentices and trainees are more likely to remain motivated and are less likely to withdraw from training when training meets these conditions. Maintaining a good balance of on-the-job and off-the-job training, however, is one of the major challenges for employers and training organisations (Snell & Hart 2007).

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented a number of issues facing apprentice chefs and how they are facilitated to learn at work. We have also outlined a number of issues facing supervising chefs in their roles as facilitators of ongoing workplace learning. By bringing these practices together in the context of apprenticeship learning we have highlighted two key issues concerning workplace learning. We suggest that apprentice learning at work is influenced by the organisation of work and the role and ‘ways of working’ of the supervising chef. Secondly, we suggest that apprentice perceptions of being supported at work, particularly in how they ‘feel’ they are learning at work is not only a part of everyday thinking and acting, it is mediated by the circumstances in which individuals act. As Johnson and Hawke (2002) suggest there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to establishing a learning culture at work. What we found in this study is that apprentices make decisions about their work choices and careers in early stages of chef apprenticeships and that these decisions are strongly influenced by their satisfaction with their work related learning experience. This has significant implications for the way on-the-job learning is facilitated.

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