

# Unintegrated training? Exploring links between off- and on-the-job learning

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In recent years there has been increasing interest in the link between classroom and workplace learning. For example, Harris, Willis and Simons (1997) have looked at the concepts of integrated training for apprentices and have raised some questions about the effectiveness of the integration between the formal and workplace learning environments. But what about workplaces where there is no provision for integrated training, where the employer either assumes that institutional training is sufficient preparation, or that new employees will 'pick up' in some way anything else he or she needs to know in order to do the job?

## THE STUDY

The research reported here was conducted with two cohorts of students from a private vocational education and training college in Australia, fourteen of whom were students at the College in 1997, and six of whom were 'workers' who had graduated from the course within the previous two years and had moved into employment. The respondents, seventeen female and three male, were from two particular courses, Executive Secretarial Skills, and Hospitality and Tourism, which are at Certificate IV level in the Australian Qualifications Framework introduced in 1995, and are for one year full-time. The college's curriculum for those courses is based on national competency standards and utilises nationally accredited competency-based modules.

The workers were in full- or part-time employment, and were selected in consultation with the co-principals of the college, firstly on the basis of having completed the college course within the previous two years, and thus assumed to be reasonably able to recall their experience of transfer to the workplace of competencies learned in the formal setting, and secondly on being geographically accessible for face-to-face interviews. The students were selected randomly and on the basis of availability at the time of the interviews. With the interviewees' permission, all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

An initial interview, early in the year, established for the researchers the level of understanding by the respondents of such concepts as competencies and transfer of learning. This provided the basis for a second interview undertaken late in the year which explored the students' and graduates' perceptions about the learning strategies they adopted in the classroom and in the workplace respectively, and about the extent to which they perceived classroom learning was transferred to the workplace. Learning strategies were identified using a 'critical incident' approach, and the findings from that part of the study were reported in a paper presented at a conference in December 1999 (Dymock and Gerber, 1999). The focus of this paper is the perceived transfer of learning.

## TRANSFER OF LEARNING

### Workers

When asked, 'To what extent were you able to apply what you learned in your course to the workplace?', five of the six workers perceived that their college training had generally prepared them for their jobs. For example, W2 said that 'they do cover basically everything you need to enter the workplace but it's not until you are in the workplace that you begin to build on what you have learnt'. This was supported by W:

... I pretty much learned everything I needed to learn [at the college], unless you go into specialising and you can't teach every form of specialising in every job so it gave me a good sort of background...

However W3 also found that she could not utilise her hospitality training in the workplace because despite her experience in customer service positions as a casual at a resort for more than a year,

when she asked about a permanent position she was made switchboard operator, which she found 'extremely boring'.

Another worker, W4, was disgruntled with her college training, claiming she knew 'nothing' when she went to work in an office:

I didn't have much practical experience... I don't think [the college] spends enough time on typewriters, on computers, because that is mainly what it is. And it is also a good idea to put people on the front desk but we only did it for an hour out of the whole year and that doesn't give you much of a go at it.

This worker also complained that less time could have been spent at the college on the study of managing a business because 'I came [to the college] thinking I am going to learn to be a receptionist not a manager'. This was in direct contrast to the response of W1. W4 said that what she obtained from her college training were her typing speed, and 'you learn how to dress, you learn how to talk'.

## **Students**

The fourteen students were almost at the end of their one-year courses, and had either undertaken work experience as part of their training or had part-time jobs. Overwhelmingly they perceived their college training as highly relevant to the workplace. S11 said 'You get a background [at the college] of what to do and how to do it', and S12 said: If I didn't do this course I would be up the creek without a paddle.

S2 was quite clear about the perceived usefulness of the course for the workplace:

... a lot of things we have done [at the college] during the year I thought were just absolutely stupid and a waste of time, but it ended up they did use them. For example, petty cash reconciliation every day and how they were telling us how we had to write letters in the book before we posted them, and I thought as if anyone would waste their time with that, but they actually did all these things.

Two of the students identified the transfer of learning with tasks they had been set in the workplace: S5 said that she had been 'really lucky' because in her work experience she had been a 'real' secretary for a week; S10, when asked if what she had learned had prepared her for an office, responded: 'Yes, just by the letter typing, answering the phones and just interacting with the public'.

S1 said that she felt she would have been able to transfer the learning if she had been given a chance to, but her work experience comprised 'menial little jobs that nobody else wanted to do'.

## **NEW LEARNING**

### **Workers**

Asked, 'What did you need to learn for the job which you felt you had not learned in the classroom training, and how did you go about learning those things?', the workers generally felt that there was nothing specific that they needed to learn on the job which they had not learned at the college, pointing out however the need to adapt to the needs and expectations of the organisations for which they worked, as W5 explained:

Once you get there you are fitting in with the office and you are learning how they do things so you have to modify what you have learnt [at the college] to suit the office...

W5 also commented on the need to adapt to the specialised tasks of the office, but added: 'They do sort of get thrown at you, though'. She said that the 'scariest' thing was using the phone because they had not used phones much in their college training and that in her first job the staff seemed to expect that she would know how to use it. But she was always cutting people off and then other staff showed her what to do, and she also watched other people to see how they did it.

W3, the switchboard operator at a resort, had a more organised introduction to using the phone system, with the executive secretary sitting with her and showing her how to do it for two four-hour shifts to 'basically show me what I needed to know, but there are a few things that I have learned as time goes by...'

W6 thought that the college course might have covered a bit more 'face-to-face stuff' such as dealing with clients and telephone manner because 'once you get thrown into the job there, it is not the easiest thing really'. He also felt that working to deadlines was different on the job to in the classroom because 'in a class situation you have an assessment and you may be able to get an extension and lose marks but you can't just lose a mark in the workplace because it is real people and if you are not prepared to get the job done then they are going to lose some money'. He thought therefore that time management was important in his office and that he had 'probably not' learned that at the college.

The graduate who felt that she was not well prepared for the workforce, W4, said that she had learned how to handle pressure, such as when three phones rang at once, being nice to people when they are rude to you ('you just have to bite your tongue'), and to use a 'newfangled' computer package that had been set up for this particular company. Asked whether there had been formal training with the new system, W4 replied:

No, me and [another employee] just stayed back one night ... We just played around with it and worked it out for ourselves... we are still just figuring out things on it.

However, a senior employee did show W4 the ways the organisation dealt with standard forms on the computer, and the changes she had to make to the standard form for each client. W4 also observed that although 5 pm was the official finishing time, 'no one leaves at 5' because the perception was that 'you have got nothing to do if you leave at 5'.

## Students

Twelve of the fourteen students interviewed were able to identify something that they needed to learn on the job which they had not come across in their college training, but the ways in which they learned these new things in the workplace varied considerably.

Two of the students mentioned airport procedures that they had not practised in their course, but which were demonstrated for them at the workplace, and a third was initially anxious when confronted with an 'unfriendly computer' whilst attending to airport passengers. S2 was shown computerised accounting during his work experience, which he had not been trained in, but said that he had not learned much from that because it was only a demonstration and he did not do it himself.

S3 worked in a bar and was told what things to look out for when she was not serving customers, and she also 'watched other people sometimes, but mostly commonsense'. Working in a resort restaurant, S4 said she had learnt at the college how to set up a table for two or four, but was unprepared for the bulk setting up of tables at the resort:

I was thrown in. It was expected that I knew how to do it and when it wasn't done properly one of the supervisors came in and said, "You haven't done this right, it's not right, this is the way you have to do it", in a gruff voice.

S13 also had a functions supervisor at a resort who was 'intimidating and he didn't like you approaching him', so that S13 tended to take a lot of notice of what the other staff did, and ask them questions about how to do things, rather than approach the supervisor. S13 thought the only 'training' provided at the resort was at an orientation day, which he had not been available to attend. On the other hand, when S5 was asked to archive and shred files at a lawyer's office, a task she had never done before, another girl from the company stayed with her for half a day, showing her what to do, and checking that it was done properly. After that S5 was left alone and was confident of the results.

Several students commented on differences they perceived between the classroom and the workplace. For example, S11 believed that typewriters and some of the computer programs used at the college were obsolete compared to those used in her office. S12 commented:

In the office you have more people coming in, you have more interruptions, you have things you have to do, you prioritise, whereas [at the college] you are in a set routine, ... so it's good they gave us the work experience.

Originally placed at a resort for a week's work experience in her hospitality course, S14 was subsequently invited to fill the human resources role while the occupant was on leave. She said that they had covered only basic human resource topics at the college, but that she coped with the workplace responsibility because she had covered a lot of the role during her week's work experience,

and, before the human resource person went on leave, 'we had a twenty-minute talk, she told me the main things to do and that was that'. During the four weeks, S14 also sought advice from an indirect supervisor, and commented that 'they are really nice people to work with there so they help you out'.

## **LOCATION FOR LEARNING**

### **Workers**

As noted in the responses to the first question, above, the workers felt that the college generally prepared them for the workplace and they then had to adapt to the particular requirements of the offices in which they worked. They were therefore mostly unable to suggest particular elements that were better learned in the workplace. W1 suggested, however, that if she were to do any more training, she would prefer it to be in the workplace because 'it is the way they like it to be done'. She recognised that specialist training, for example in accountancy, would need to be studied outside. W5 also commented that if she did any further training at that stage she expected it would be specific training within her workplace.

W6 commented on one difference he had noted between the classroom and the workplace: if there is something you don't understand, 'in the classroom you usually want to know straight away so you go and ask the teacher; when you are in the workforce you tend to work it out more for yourself', particularly because 'you don't want to be seen as not knowing what you are doing and asking questions every five minutes or so', especially as the other staff are usually occupied with another client.

### **Students**

None of the students favoured a complete workplace learning approach, but several spoke of the need for a 'balance' between the learning in the classroom and on-the-job. A number reiterated the points made in response to the first question above: that the college training provided the basic knowledge to build on, although there were different opinions on whether this should be basic skills training or theory. For example, two of the respondents advocated learning more difficult aspects which took time, such as accounting, and fares and ticketing, at college, while another said that if he had not learned how to carry plates at the training course he would not have been able to do it in the workplace.

Other topics suggested individually for learning on the job included computers and phones 'because you can have a fiddle around and more or less just work it out for yourself', hands-on activities such as stocking shelves, mailing and banking because they were straightforward, and attitudes towards customers.

## **DISCUSSION**

There was a strong perception from five of the six workers of a direct transfer of learning from their college course to the workplace. The concept of 'building on' the initial foundation was a common theme. The eventual placement of a graduate in a position which apparently called on little of her training or talents suggests that some employers give little thought to matching skills to positions, but simply 'fill the vacancy', a situation likely to result in dissatisfaction from the employee and ultimately probably the employer. It is difficult to know how to regard the case of the graduate who felt that she had little to transfer from her college course - there may be other factors at play here which were not brought out by the interview questions.

As with the majority of workers, the students were unanimously positive about the applicability to the workplace of what they had learned in their college courses. The experience of the student who only discovered the relevance of some aspects of the course when she undertook work experience, reiterates the principle advocated by Knowles (1990) among others, that adults need to know why they need to know. Perhaps earlier exposure to workplace practices would assist that process, but that is not always easy to arrange. Similarly, the complaint of the disgruntled worker that the course covered 'irrelevant' areas such as management, raises questions about when in a person's career such topics are best addressed.

It is clear from the students' responses that there was a variety of work experiences to which they were exposed in the week or two they had for that activity: the extent to which they were able to transfer their college learning appears to have been greatly influenced by the degree to which they were given meaningful tasks where they were employed.

In general, the workers did not identify significant 'new' learning they needed to acquire on the job, but generally emphasised the need to adapt what they learned in their courses to the particular requirements of their employers. The extent to which 'structured' training was offered varied considerably, with most workers seemingly left to observe or ask or experiment in order to learn particular skills or responses in the office. Workers also commented on other factors where they observed there were differences between the classroom and work environment, such as the different pressures on working to deadlines and therefore the need for good time management in the workplace, and the need to observe unwritten office expectations, for example in relation to finishing times.

A number of the students also observed the differences in office routines compared with the college routines they had been used to, for example the number of interruptions to their office work. Most students identified an occasion where they had to undertake new learning on the job, sometimes because the employer had expectations that the student would be able to do it without further instruction. When these expectations were not met, the employer (or at least the immediate supervisor) did not always respond well in terms of supporting the employee, sometimes because of a supervisor's attitude, and sometimes apparently by default.

The result was that much of the students' intentional learning in the workplace was what Marsick and Watkins (1990, 12) called 'informal learning', which they defined as 'not typically classroom-based or highly structured, and control of learning rests in the hands of the learners'. The learning undertaken by one student when she was unexpectedly invited to fill the human resources position for a month appears to have been mostly informal learning, but with some training and a supportive colleagues. The student's apparent ability to rise to the occasion raises research issues in relation to the extent to which this was an outcome of her college preparation compared with the influence of her own abilities and self-confidence.

In general, the workers felt that their college training prepared them for the workplace, and that any further training was seen as being strongly for specific in-house purposes. It seemed also that the workers accepted responsibility for their own learning in the workplace.

The students had a variety of views about where particular training was best placed, some believing that theory or harder-to-grasp topics should be covered at the college, and more straightforward work-related practices taught on the job, others suggesting that basic skills were best taught at the college and then developed in the workplace to suit particular requirements.

The study findings suggest that employers are not offering sufficient support to their new employees in terms of preparing them for particular workplaces or of helping them develop. One of the limitations of this research, however, is that it does not include the employers' perceptions, and they may have quite different views about the extent of their responsibility for training, particularly for employees or work-experience students who are undertaking or who have completed a formal course of study. It would also be useful to seek the college teachers' responses to the students' and employees' views.

Given the range of responses uncovered by the research, perhaps there should be some mechanism by which the graduates of this and similar vocational education and training courses and employers can provide feedback to the educational institutions. Whilst there are competencies to which the institutions teach, the findings here raise questions about the extent to which employers are familiar with those competencies, as well as what limitations those competencies might have in relation to what might be described as an organisation's culture.

## References

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