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## ABSTRACT

These 12 papers are part of the study materials for the one-semester distance education unit, Project Development Plan 2, in the Open Campus Program at Deakin University (Australia). They examine the breadth and depth of the actions and debates around the social construction of skill and the critical role played by the concept of skill in the gendering of the workplace. An introduction (Elaine Butler) provides an overview of the papers. The first two papers illustrate the broad picture. "Con-testing Skill" (Elaine Butler, Helen Connole) locates contemporary studies of women and skill within the discourses of education and training and the Australian microeconomic reform agenda. "The Gendering of Skill and Vocationalism in Twentieth-Century Australian Education" (Jill Blackmore) provides an historical base for the contemporary discourse as well as a framework for future critique. "What's in a Word" (Cate Poynton, Kim Lazenby) offers a precis of a research project that renames the skills of women workers in clerical occupations. "From Industry to Enterprise" (Kim Windsor) investigates the potential for "women's" industries to influence award and industry restructuring processes. "Women and Skill Formation" (Ann Byrne) draws on Labour Research Center research, with a focus on skill identification issues, classifications, and methodologies. "Women and Award Restructuring in Local Government" (Mira Robertson) considers implications for women workers within the industry. "The Transport Industry" (Robyn Francis) juxtaposes the male-dominated transport industry and its inherent challenges against "feminized" industries. "Women's Skills in Community Services" (Susan Kenna) contends that a fundamental shift is required in the way caring occupations are valued. "Community Service Workers and Pay Equity" (Sara Charlesworth) pursues issues of valuing service work and the skills inherent in such work. "Skill and Skill Formation for Women Workers" (Sue Harper) reports on a project that investigated women working in the hospitality industry in jobs usually viewed as unskilled or semiskilled. "Training for the Computerized Office" (Rosemary Harris) is a personal perspective of one female worker's experiences. "The ideology of Skill and Gender" (Cathy Emery) is a review of the literature around the ideology and construct of skill. (YLB)

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# A - G E N D E R I N G   S K I L L C O N V E R S A T I O N S   A R O U N D   W O M E N , W O R K   A N D   S K I L L : A N   A U S T R A L I A N   P E R S P E C T I V E

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EEE703 PROJECT DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2

**A-GENDERING SKILL**  
CONVERSATIONS AROUND WOMEN,  
WORK AND SKILL: AN AUSTRALIAN  
PERSPECTIVE

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EDITED BY ELAINE BUTLER AND MIKE BROWN

Deakin University

This book has been produced as part of the study materials for EEE703 *Project Development Plan 2*, which is one of the units offered by the Faculty of Education in Deakin University's Open Campus Program. It has been prepared for the unit team, whose members are:

Mike Brown  
Elaine Butler  
Doris Tate  
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The study materials include:

E. Butler & M. Brown, *A-gendering Skill: Conversations Around Women, Work and Skill: An Australian Perspective\**  
*EEE703 Project Development Plan 2: Reader*

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## SERIES INTRODUCTION

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The nature and purpose of education in the workplace has been the subject of much debate in Australia in recent years. While the vagaries of local and international competition have led many firms to reconsider the role of their workforce and the training requirements this entails, governments have been equally keen to adapt existing education systems to the perceived needs of industry. Leading union bodies have been distinguished in this debate by their pro-active role, outlining the path by which a reconstructed industrial climate can win the nation a new place in the world economy.

The study materials of which this volume is a part explore the approaches to learning currently modelled within industry. In the process the question inevitably arises as to whether existing orientations and practices are in the best interests of the various stakeholders in the workplace.

The arguments developed in these volumes address themselves to a range of contemporary issues in industrial education. To date, prevailing approaches have rested upon narrow, instrumentalist notions of learning; in their different ways, the writers have set out to challenge this orthodoxy. In doing so, they highlight the silences—on questions of gender, class or ethnicity—that underpin the behaviourist outlook still dominant in the world of training.

In preparing these study materials, the course team has sought to address issues that are of fundamental concern to those involved in the complex and demanding field of workplace learning. It is hoped that, in its own modest way, the pedagogy we have developed can serve to exemplify a different notion of what industrial education might become.

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Any project such as this collection of papers involves work that is essential but often remains invisible. We would like to acknowledge and honour the work of such people who have assisted greatly and thank them for their significant contributions: Anne Richardson for her organisational skills that were critical to the success of the seminar from which the majority of these papers stem; Angela Bloomer for her skills and work in transcribing the tapes from the seminar into typed texts; and Fran Dickson for her administrative support throughout. Finally acknowledgment and thanks to all who participated in the seminar, and to the authors of papers who have given permission for their inclusion in this publication.

The paper by Jill Blackmore, 'The gendering of skill and vocationalism in twentieth-century Australian education' was first published in the *Journal of Education Policy*, vol.7, no.4, 1992, pp.351-77, and is reprinted by permission. The paper by Elaine Butler and Helen Connole, 'Con-testing skill: Women, skill and training in Australia', is adapted from 'Sitting next to Nellie: Re-viewing the training debate for women workers' which was published in *What Future for Technical and Vocational Education and Training*, International conference papers, vol.2, pp.53-82, NCVET, Leabrook, SA. The paper by Cate Poynton and Kim Lazenby, 'What's in a word: Recognition of women's skills in workplace change', is published by permission of the South Australian Department of Labour.

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# INTRODUCTION

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ELAINE BUTLER AND MIKE BROWN

From time to time circumstances give rise to favourable opportunities for women workers to pursue the recognition and valuing of their skills. The last decade in Australia has culminated in just such activity, with an intensive politicisation of the meanings and practices constructed around 'skill'. Given the increased number of women participating in the workforce and Australia's history of inequitable structures and outcomes in respect to gender and work, the contemporary microeconomic reform agenda provides a vehicle for further struggles around skill and gender equity.

The microeconomic reform agenda in Australia is interconnected with similar political movements throughout other Western industrialised countries trying to recapture market dominance in a changing global economy. A common theme in the strategic plans of OECD countries is that of increased productivity through an emphasis on 'upskilling' their (national) workforces. This includes a re-examination of work organisation and practices in the interest of competitiveness and efficiency.

The Australian model for increasing productivity differs from Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and the United States in its overt linking of education and training in and for the workplace with industrial relations. The discourse of the reform agenda has resulted in a unique alliance between the traditional industrial parties (employers, unions and government), in the interests of increasing productivity and becoming more internationally competitive.

Central to the Australian agenda is the Structural Efficiency Principle (SEP) that institutionalises requirements and parameters for those involved in industry and award restructuring. For women workers this situation is paradoxical. Once again in the narrative of women and work, the opportunity arises for contesting the hegemonic practices which shape the structures, organisation



and outcomes of work in this country. At the same time if challenges and opportunities for reform are not acted on, the potential exists to entrench further historical inequalities for women workers.

With the linking of education and training, work organisation and wages through industrial relations, skill emerges as pivotal in the debates. The texts of the agenda present an objectified and technical view of skill as 'competence', founded upon a belief in the efficiency of human capital theory. This has been exemplified by the enforcement of competency-based training (CBT) based on nationally developed competency standards. CBT, like skill, is presented as neutral and unproblematic. Critical analysis of this approach to training reveals a very different reality—CBT as deterministic, overly narrow with undue emphasis on the technical, behaviouristic and even as a form of classroom Taylorism. Such an approach is oppositional for women, both in its pedagogical processes and its inherently reductionist outcomes if based on narrow definitions of skill which do not reflect the complexities and holistic nature of 'women's work'.

For women, an early site for struggle in the macro agenda connecting work and pay with education and training centred around skill. In the interests of networking, sharing information and learning from others' experiences, a large and diverse group of people gathered at a seminar which focused on skill and skill formation for women workers. The impetus stimulated at this seminar resulted in ongoing dialogue and collective actions which continue to shape the discourse. In part, this collection of papers includes contributions which were made at that seminar. These papers along with the others which make up the collection are placed in the public arena to stimulate further collective and individual endeavours around gender and the social construction of skill.

We offer this introduction with its brief overview of the context in which this work is located to frame the issues and endeavours, hopes and concerns. The papers that follow have been selected as, together and individually, they make visible the depth and breadth of the actions and the debates around the social construct of skill.

The first two papers in this volume have been selected to illustrate the broad picture for readers. 'Con-testing skill: Women, skill and training in Australia' contributed by Elaine Butler and Helen Connole locates contemporary work around women and skill within the discourses of education and training, and the Australian micro-economic reform agenda. It focuses on issues relating to gender and struggles to redefine and reconstruct 'skills' of women workers, with examples offered from the feminised sites of clerical work, and the community services industry. Jill Blackmore's paper, 'The gendering of skill and vocationalism in twentieth-century Australian educa-

tion' provides both an historical base for the contemporary discourse as well as a framework for future critique. Through her analysis, Blackmore ably demonstrates how the concept of skill is critical to the gendering of work, and has been socially constructed over time in this country.

Section 2 of this volume includes papers from authors who work across a diverse range of industries, organisations and issues, in their endeavours to bring about positive change for women workers. The first paper by Cate Poynton and Kim Lazenby offers a précis of their research project which continues to attract widespread attention and critical acclaim for its public renaming of the skills of women workers in clerical occupations. This précis contributed by Poynton and Lazenby identifies the project aims and outcomes. Readers requiring further detail are encouraged to seek out the full copy of the final report of the project—*What's in a word: Recognition of Women's Skills in Workplace Change*.

The next two authors contribute to discussions relating to work organisation and skill. Kim Windsor's paper investigates the potential for 'women's' industries (such as clothing and textiles) to influence award and industry restructuring processes. Windsor alerts us to the dimensions of award restructuring at industry and enterprise levels. She discusses a framework in which enterprise-based initiatives can be used as mechanisms to influence decision making in organisations. Ann Byrne draws on research conducted by the Labour Research Centre (LRC), with a focus on skill identification issues, classifications and methodologies. To set such work in context, Byrne's paper commences with an overview of women's position in the (paid) workforce, with special attention given to pay equity issues.

The next group of papers (Section 3) are 'case studies', that ground analysis and discussion around worksites and projects, in which women's issues have been central. Mira Robertson investigates award restructuring within the industry of local government, and considers implications for women workers in that industry, arguing that the success of restructuring should be measured by the effect on women's position(s) in local government. Robertson contends that attitudes and values are highly significant in such work, and links major barriers to women's access to education and training with lack of encouragement by management. Like Windsor, she believes that work organisation is of fundamental concern.

The case study offered by Robyn Francis juxtaposes the male-dominated transport industry and its inherent challenges against feminised industries. The transport industry is described as being without a training culture. The challenge facing Robyn Francis is that of establishing such a culture for workplace learning, both on and off the job. She believes that this is a critical first step,

which must be taken before the industry can begin to redress gender imbalance in its profile.

Sue Kenna contends that a fundamental shift is required in the way caring occupations (based on 'women's skills') are valued. The paper contributed by Kenna is a detailed report of a skills analysis project undertaken with local government in Victoria. The data collected has been used in the successful negotiation of award definitions for community services workers. However, Kenna holds that inappropriate relativities still need to be addressed, as does the naming of the wide range (or mix) of skills required by caring work.

The Pay Equity Project discussed by Sara Charlesworth was established in part to respond to concerns highlighted above. The workers at the centre of this project are home-care workers (or home helpers). Charlesworth pursues issues of valuing service work, and the skills inherent in such work, through comparison of the occupation of home care with that of gardeners in local government. Her findings highlight issues such as the undervaluing of home-care work, and differentials between allowances and funding provision that cut right to the core of pay equity issues.

Pay equity, and the broad range of skills utilised also appear as themes in the paper by Sue Harper, who reports on a project which investigated women working in the hospitality industry in jobs usually viewed as unskilled or semi-skilled. Harper's discussion foregrounds training as a critical issue for such women, with access to relevant training being an essential first step in accepting opportunities associated with career paths, and progression. Barriers are identified, and a series of recommendations offered as strategies.

Following this series of case studies, Rosemary Harris writes from a very personal perspective of her own experiences. This return from macro issues and industry or occupation scenarios to personal experience honours a tradition of women's 'research', and acts as a timely reminder on behalf of the many women seeking positive change in their work lives.

The final paper is a contribution from Cathy Emery, in the form of a review of the literature around the ideology and construct of skill. This review not only encapsulates many of the issues raised in previous papers, but also acts as a point of referral for those interested in pursuing further ideas and issues of relevance.

These papers firmly situate skill as a political issue on the agenda of women and work in this country. It is our hope that the challenges they offer will provide further basis for continuing conversations.

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# SECTION 1

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# CON-TESTING SKILL: WOMEN, SKILL AND TRAINING IN AUSTRALIA

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ELAINE BUTLER AND HELEN CONNOLE

## Introduction

It is not simply error that keeps skill unseen (Acker quoted in Jackson 1991, p. 19)

The context for this paper is the contemporary microeconomic reform agenda and its related practices in Australia, as it intersects with discourses of education and training in and for the workplace.

Given the significance of the construct of 'skill' as a contested area in these discourses, we will focus on issues relating to gender and struggles to redefine and reconstruct the 'skills' of women workers. The community services industry and the occupation of clerical work will be used to provide examples for our analysis. Drawing on feminist theories, including the intersection of feminism and postmodernism, we locate ourselves in opposition to the positivist theories and practices which drive the mainstream/malestream of the current training debate. We seek to create spaces for dialogue among women.

It is paradoxical that at this time of chaos and complexity (Harvey 1989) in our Western postmodern post-industrial societies the 'solutions' being brought into play are focused in the technical-rational with its discourses of universalism and determinism. From a postmodern frame, it becomes possible to locate and claim spaces in which to invent alternative futures through tactical interruptions to these dominant discourses. We wish to challenge the naming of reality and the assumption that the reality being named is desired and shared by 'women workers'.

As we see it, the agendas of equal employment opportunity and affirmative action expressed in legislative requirements for workplace reform have been a useful starting point and baseline. As a number of writers (Burton 1991; Cockburn 1991) have pointed out they fall short of generating real and lasting change for women in their gendered workplaces.

A postmodern reading enables the challenging of (gendered) dualisms used to silence and marginalise: public-private, man-woman, paid-unpaid work, 'hard'-'soft', manual-mental, rational/objective-emotional/subjective, productive-reproductive. The strength of the dualisms between the norm and the 'Other' is such that it acts to establish an unassailable and invisible hegemony of the dominant culture. As a consequence of this hegemony and its associated practices, gender-based equal employment opportunity and affirmative action initiatives are forced into constant renegotiation from their starting point.

Another claim of postmodern theorising is that experiences displayed as texts are constructed through language which is both gendered and a site of power (Foucault 1980; Irigaray 1985; Kristeva 1986; Spivak 1987). In discussing agendas of the workplace we are forced into the positivist language of the technical-rational. We need, as part of our own reflexive practice, to be critically aware continually of our use of this form of language.

## The microeconomic reform agenda in Australia

It can be argued that 'economic recessions' have tended in industrialised countries to produce perceived 'crises', framed in the language of human capital theory as deficits in the skills of workers and in the performance of school systems in producing labour market entrants with the 'right' skills available (Jill Blackmore's paper; Pocock 1988; Hart 1992, pp. 69-71). The solution to this 'problem' located in the industrial worker has been for the state to initiate programs of skills training in and for the (human capital) workforce. This agenda is currently widely visible in government legislation and policy, the vocational education literature and the popular press in the United Kingdom (Jessup 1991; Esland 1991), Canada, (Jackson 1991b; Gaskell 1992), New Zealand (Boxall 1992), Scandinavia and Western Europe (ACTU/Trade Development Commission 1987).

The microeconomic reform agenda is being implemented in Australia through a concurrent change strategy linking productivity increases with technological development, education and training, reform of the industrial relations system, changes in work organisation and the exposure of the Austral-

ian economy to global competition through deregulation of trade.

In 1988 the impetus for industry restructuring was given formal shape by the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission in the form of the Structural Efficiency Principle (SEP) (Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission 1988). This became the pivotal point of the new national system of wage fixation linking wages to productivity increases and incentives for improvements in working conditions. Award restructuring and workplace reform have since progressed, unevenly and with varied outcomes, across a range of industrial sectors (Curtain & Matthews 1990; Reimer 1992).

The sheer scope and complexity of the microeconomic reform agenda in Australia is noteworthy, affecting education and training at all levels from schools to higher and further education and industry. There is also a substantial commitment of public financial investment accompanied by broad consensus across peak bodies in industry, trade unions and government as to the changes required. The rhetoric, the pace of policy and procedural changes at government level and the degree of involvement by the industrial parties gives the impression that interruption of this agenda will not be easy.

The reform of education and training systems is expected to deliver 'a more skilled and adaptable workforce' with appropriate 'attitudinal and behavioural change' (Willis 1988, pp. 4-12), charged with the delivery of the vision of microeconomic reform.

Little reference to gender can be found in the government texts on reform. The removal of discriminatory features of industrial awards and the facilitation of pay equity receive token acknowledgment (Morris 1989, pp. 7-8). The same invisibility of gender will become evident in the following discussion on 'unpacking the toolbox' of competency-based training (CBT).

## **Unpacking the toolbox: The education and training system**

As an integral part of the microeconomic reform agenda, the education and training system is required to supply 'human capital' with the 'right' mix of flexible skills for the restructured workplace. The necessary skills are to be prescribed by the major industrial parties, that is, industry (through employers), union and government in tripartite formal consultative bodies at several levels, with a primary role accorded to national industry-specific Industry Training Advisory Bodies (ITABs) and the newly established Australian National Training Authority (ANTA).

The definition of workplace skills has been cast in the language of competencies, comprising hierarchical levels of knowledge, skill and application (including attitudinal components) claimed as a broad and holistic framework (National Training Board 1991a). The 'total competency' of the workforce is expressed in the eight levels of the Australian Standards Framework from workforce entry to senior professional/manager. The specification of competencies has taken two tracks. One comprises the development of competency standards for industry with ITABs acting as competency standards bodies (CSBs) commissioning and overseeing the production of competency standards in their industry for accreditation by the NTB. Not all CSBs are ITABs; some are industry-specific consortia such as the Tourism Training Authority.

The second track of competency development is that of the specification and development of 'key' generic competencies for the workplace. Again these are influenced by British and European examples (National Training Board 1990) and, in the Australian context, immortalised in text in the Finn (1991), Mayer Committee (1992) and Employment and Skills Formation Council (ESFC)/Carmichael (1992) Reports.

The competency-based nature of this agenda sets not only the content but also the pedagogical process of training reform. Henceforth training is to be:

- based on agreed national competency standards, industry-based and/or generic focused on outcome rather than process;
- packaged into discrete and sequential modules (modularised);
- available for 'flexible delivery' (e.g. in the workplace, by open learning, in TAFE, at home);
- self-paced, allowing learners to proceed at their own pace;
- assessed on demonstration of competence by the learner;
- structured to facilitate the recognition of prior learning (RPL); and
- accredited and portable to improve multi-skilling and flexibility, both geographic and industrial.

The CBT approach is framed within the discursive practices of behaviourism, nested within the hegemony of technical-rationalism. Gender has been invisible in this construction of neutral descriptors. When the texts of major reports are examined, gender is referenced in addenda (National Training Board 1991b); or briefly included under equity issues (Mayer 1992; ESFC/Carmichael 1992). Women are presented as objects to be 'done to' by benevolent governments, not as active subjects (Yeatman 1990, p. 87).

Education and training are of central significance for women workers (George 1991, pp. 22-5). This is illustrated in the following statements, identi-



fyng objectives and action plans relating to women's employment and training.

Objectives for the year 2000 are to promote women's access to and participation in all occupational streams of the workforce and to reduce the earnings gap between male and female workers by upgrading women's skills, facilitating the combination of work with family responsibilities, promoting the implementation of affirmative action principles and ensuring adequate representation and participation of women in decision-making processes in the employment and industrial relations arena.

Action plans feature measures to eliminate barriers to education, training and employment of women; facilitate equitable participation by women in labour market programs; improve employment prospects for Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and immigrant women; protection of outworkers; ratification and implementation of ILO Convention 156; occupational health and safety issues for women; women's needs in industrial restructuring; extension of the range of jobs available to women in the Australian Defence Force and improving the employment position of women in local government. (Office of the Status of Women 1992, p. 47)

What is interesting here is that while this text is named as being about employment and training, a whole range of broader issues are immediately involved.

## Women in the Australian workforce

Australia has the most gender-segregated workforce among the OECD countries. Women, who make up 41% of the workforce, are clustered in a narrow range of predominantly service industries, and are occupationally segregated in jobs defined as requiring lower levels of skill than male workers. Their average weekly earnings are lower than men's and they make up three-quarters of the part-time workforce, most of which is employed on a casual basis. Their access to consultation in the workplace, to training and to career paths has been limited or nonexistent (Department of Industrial Relations, 1990; Kovacic 1992).

Women have been poorly represented in processes of microeconomic reform despite their high representation in the total workforce. Much of the urgency and shaping of the issues has come from the manufacturing sector, particularly metals where women workers are low in numbers, status and influence.

The microeconomic reform agenda was nevertheless cautiously viewed by women in the trade union movement and in government, especially those with equal opportunity/affirmative action responsibilities and advisory responsibilities to Ministers of Labour, as creating space for the assertion of women's voices. (Women's Adviser's Unit 1989; Windsor 1991a). Initiatives such as the setting up of consultative committees at workplace level provided an opportunity for women to be represented and heard (Women's Adviser's Unit 1991), with potential to influence job redesign and career path structures, access to training, recognition of family responsibilities, innovative/flexible work arrangements and improved conditions for part-time and casual workers. The redefinition of 'skills' was a central focus and will be explored more fully later. The removal of barriers to pay equity was also hoped for (Labour Research Centre 1990).

Employer recognition of the 'potential' of women workers remains couched, however, in the language of human capital theory, especially as it relates to productivity (Jill Blackmore's paper, p. 60; Davis 1991, p. 3; Pratt 1991, p. 9). The pursuit of opportunities for women workers similar to those outlined above, while superficially resembling those of feminists in the bureaucracy, remains subordinated to the demands of a malestream human capital approach which is focused on 'fixing' the contradictions of a (post-industrial) economy through a form of modified Taylorism (Brown 1991; Jill Blackmore's paper). This necessarily sets up a dissonance which illustrates the marginalisation of women as workers, along with the work that they do.

A second dissonance is that of gendered norms. The norm is established as male, full-time, Anglo and technical, producing 'things' not people, exemplified in metals industry restructuring which was used as the model for award restructuring across the economy. Workers not fitting this pattern experience themselves and are experienced as dissonant/deviant. The separation of public and private spheres reinforces this dissonance further. The language of the public sphere is the official language.

The tensions between (human and capital) productivity and issues of equity is a final dissonance here. Is equity to be abandoned once the 'real' (men's) business of 'productivity enhancement' takes over in the face of global trade warfare? How shall productivity be defined, by whom in whose interests and at what costs?

Community services and clerical work provide rich examples of the feminised services sector. Both are major employers of women with workforces that are over 75% female. Both have experienced incoherent career path structures and limited access to training. Both have high levels of part-time and casual work, an increasing trend (Women's Bureau 1989, p. 1; Butler 1992). Low

levels of unionisation are a feature of both areas. The influence of technology has impacted on these areas in different ways. Its impact on clerical work has been decisive and multifaceted (Game & Pringle 1983; Zuboff 1988; Harris 1991). In community services differential access to technology upgrades and associated training is an issue.

Definition and placement within the microeconomic reform agenda have been issues for both clerical and community services workers. The clerical occupation was not named as an 'industry' despite the common focus of its work. For community services the whole concept of 'industry' has been viewed an alien one which is still being worked through, as the sector is extremely diverse both in the nature of its workforce and the work performed.

Like work in service industries, training for clerical work has been historically closely linked to girls' education in schools (Jill Blackmore's paper). This is still in evidence today and augmented by pre-employment training programs paid for by women workers themselves. Formal workplace training has been limited and training by sitting next to Nellie is much in evidence.

In community services, training provision, like the sector itself, is diverse. There are more 'levels of competence' than in clerical work, ranging into professional areas where pre-employment tertiary education is available. In paraprofessional areas, formal training in TAFE is increasing. Workplace training is characterised by inadequate resourcing both in time and money and by its ad-hoc nature and general scarcity.

Both clerical and community services work are sites where the prevailing hegemony can be (and is) challenged. Both are positioned as 'Other' in the main discourse through the gendered nature of their work and their workforce profiles. In both, education and training for women is now firmly placed on the political agenda. Concurrently the 'training agenda' has resulted in the politicisation of 'skill' (Jackson 1989).

## Skill and the gendered workplace

Skill, through the Structural Efficiency Principle, is linked inextricably with wages, work organisation, job satisfaction and power (Curtain & Matthews 1990, p. 28; McCreadie 1991, p. 34). Thus training 'has major implications for workers denied access to training, or recognition of their skills, particularly women' (Cathy Emery's paper, p. 164).

In Australia as in other industrialised countries skill had become associated with male trade work in manufacturing, linked to apprenticeships and TAFE training (Pocock 1988; Jenson 1989). Women were almost completely

excluded from this sphere. The reform agenda has loosened these labels and their linkages, offering opportunities to broaden the concept of skill and the range of work to which it is applied. This development has been problematic for women workers attempting to claim the right to 'skill' and all that it implies as gendered hierarchies are reconstructed.

Part of the contemporary mainstream/malestream redefinition of 'skill' has been its incorporation in the 'commonsense' notion of competency.

Who can be against 'competence'! It is the motherhood slogan of current reform movements in institutions of education and training. It has come to stand for basic, no-frills learning related to life roles, in which goals are clearly specified and results are objectively measured. Thus, we are assured, with the competency approach a dollar spent on education brings a dollar's worth of results. This 'common-sense' approach to educational efficiency is touted as the answer to individual employability and the key to ... 'competitive edge' in the new global economy. The rhetoric is persuasive, even comforting, in these times of economic upheaval. (Jackson 1989, p. 58)

### *The politics of definition*

The definitions of competence/competency are a site of struggle over the meanings ascribed to these terms; meanings which then set the scope for recognition of what is constituted and valued as 'work'. The National Training Board (NTB) controls the definition of competency and all related terms in Australia through its political 'statement of functions' (National Training Board 1991a, p. 33). 'In order to avoid confusion and cross-purpose debate, it is necessary to arrive at an agreed terminology' (National Training Board 1990, p. 2.1; National Training Board 1991a, p. 30). A glossary of terms defined by the NTB follows this statement.

Competency is defined by the NTB as follows: 'knowledge and skill and the application of that knowledge and skill within an occupation or industry level to the standard of performance required in employment' (National Training Board 1991a, p. 18). It is interesting that knowledge required no further definition (perhaps its ownership is already securely vested in industry?). Attitudes are not admitted to these definitions and therefore to the defining of competency. Application is regarded as the self-evident demonstration of knowledge and skills in workplace performance.

'Skill' not surprisingly has been the most contentious element of the definition. Field (1990) in a widely-used handbook *Skilling Australia* provides

the following definition of skill: 'Skill can refer to any of the behaviours or abilities that an individual has, such as "conceptual skill" or "verbal skill"' (Field 1990, p. 11). Skill formation is defined as '...a holistic concept that includes education, personal development, formal vocational training, on-the-job learning and experiential learning' (p. 3). Field identified, from a wide-ranging international review of research a list of industry-related 'skills in short supply' in capitalist economies. These included:

- self-management
- conceptual skills
- creative problem-solving
- holistic thinking
- self-directed learning skills
- literacy skills
- information management
- teamwork and group learning
- communication skills
- fault diagnosis and rectification (Field 1990, p. 13)

A similar list can be found in a US context:

- organisational effectiveness/leadership
- interpersonal/negotiation/teamwork
- self-esteem/goal-setting-motivation/employability—career development
- creative thinking/problem solving
- communication: listening and oral communication
- 3 R's (reading, writing, computation)
- learning to learn (Carnevale, Gainer & Meltzer 1990, p. 3).

Field utilises the concept of the 'skills iceberg' in which a distinction is made between visible 'surface' skills and those which are less immediately discernible.

The body of skills that a worker uses to do a particular job or to learn a new competency area resemble an iceberg ... Task skills are at the core of the iceberg, and are mainly 'above the surface'. Surrounding this core, and mainly 'under the surface', are a variety of other types of skills. Despite the fact that they are not very visible to vocational education researchers, they contribute enormously to workplace competence. (Field 1990, p. 31)

While Field's relatively expansive definitions and categories appear to allow for a diversity of approaches and practices (Brown 1991) the formal position adopted by the NTB is restrictive as demonstrated by the following NTB definitions and categorisations:

skill may be perceptual, motor, manual, intellectual, social. The nature of tasks usually requires a combination of these and usually involves the application of cognitive and psychomotor functions, together with appropriate knowledge. Skill is (i) cumulative: it is built up gradually through repeated practice; (ii) sequential: each part is dependent on the previous part and influences the next. (National Training Board 1991a, p. 32)

However, the way this has been translated into the skill components of competency, by default, narrows the definition and, we argue, reinforces the hegemonic practices associated with it.

The concept of competency focuses on what is expected of an employee in the workplace rather than on the learning process, it embodies the ability to transfer and apply skills and knowledge to new situations and environments. This is a broad concept of competency in that all aspects of work performance, and not only narrow task skills, are included. It encompasses:

the requirement to perform individual tasks (task skills)

the requirement to manage a number of different tasks within the job (task management skills)

the requirement to respond to irregularities and breakdowns in routine (contingency management skills)

the requirement to deal with the responsibilities and expectations of the work environment (job/role environment skills)

Moreover, the broad concept of competency should be:

related to realistic workplace practices

expressed as an outcome

understandable to trainers, supervisors and potential employers. (National Training Board 1991a, p. 18)

These bear little relation to Field's 'skills in short supply', and omit the social/political and economic context. The reductionist approach taken has resulted in a loss of complexity and flexibility implied in the original descriptions of skills by Field and Carnevale.

### *The gendered spanner*

Gender is dealt with in the NTB *Policy and Guidelines* document by omission—it does not appear. In Field a series of assumptions about women's skills include the assertions that:

women's jobs often require them to learn a narrow range of skills, such as wordprocessing or assembly work, and then apply these skills in repetitive jobs under intense time pressures;

there is often more scope for ongoing skill development in male dominated occupations than in traditional female areas such as health, child care, library work and clerical jobs. (Field 1990, pp. 17–18)

The assumptions that 'skill development' offers more scope in male-dominated occupations (bricklaying? metalworking?) than in child-care or health implies a definition of skill that is startling to say the least. A quotation from a woman clerical worker in a health care setting may help to illustrate the point. 'If a machine makes a reject you can throw it out. You can't do that with a person' (Poynton & Lazenby 1992, p. 55).

It becomes clear from this example that the view of women as 'less skilled' than men is scarcely neutral, but the result of historical process of gendered structuring, which has led one recent author to refer to 'the skills of men, the talents of women' (Jenson 1989, p. 44). The dualisms constructed between male/hard/productive/rational-objective and female/soft/reproductive/emotional-subjective and between public/private work are reflected here.

The meaning of skill in the gendered workplace is intensely contested, both in Australia and internationally (Acker 1990; Attewell 1990; Burton, Hag & Thompson 1987; Gaskell 1987; Jackson 1991b; Wajcman 1991). The definition itself, the methods by which skills are identified (Windsor 1991b) and the manner in which competencies are identified and categorised are all problematic. The NTB late in 1991 belatedly recognised the 'overlooked' skills, 'technical', interpersonal and organisational (Windsor 1991b) of women workers (National Training Board 1991b) in an addendum to *Policy and Guidelines*, a document which seems to have had remarkably little impact on the malestream. Its categorisations do not correspond with the 'official' skills categories (National Training Board 1991a).

The ways in which skills are named directly shape the development and definition of competencies. The standards then become the foundation of curriculum development for competency-based training packages for skills development in the workplace. As the standards are accredited nationally and

at state level through the National Framework for the Recognition of Training they become the basis for core curriculum at both levels (VEETAC 1991; Training Recognition Unit 1992).

This process is predicated, even within its own terms, on the 'accurate' initial identification of competencies required in the workplace. When much of women's 'skill' is ignored, trivialised or misrepresented, the consequences for training and all that it leads to, are severe. Both access to training and the nature of training offered directly affect job roles, mobility within the workplace, career paths and, of course, pay levels. A further complication has become the implication of industrial relations issues in the training agenda in Australia, as in other countries on this 'track'.

Tensions between training providers, with concerns over maintaining the integrity of national qualifications systems, and industrial parties concerned to achieve workplace context and flexibility in use at the enterprise level are common. (National Training Board 1992, pp. 6-7)

Given all of this it becomes clear why those concerned with the status of women working in post-industrial capitalist societies claim skill as a site of contestation.

... skill is a direct correlate of sexual power. Skill has increasingly been defined against women ... far from being an objective economic fact, skill is often an ideological category imposed on certain types of work by virtue of the sex and power of the workers who perform it ... (Phillips & Taylor quoted in Cockburn 1990, p. 93)

## Con-testing the given

For us, the issues have become clearer in our work on occupational and skills analyses/audits and development of competency standards with women workers in community services and clerical occupational groups (Neale, with Butler, Connole et al. 1992; Connole 1992). We found that, despite our own awareness of the gendered nature of skills and our successes in facilitating women's naming of their skills in considerable detail, both the language and the prescribed frameworks of the rhetoric that we were forced to use acted as repressive forces. As Blackmore argues 'despite the post-Fordist rhetoric, government reports on labour markets, the economy and education still carry with them many common-sense "Fordist" assumptions about the nature of skills: that skills are concrete, can be readily categorised, are technically defined and neutral' (p. 39). When women began to name their skills, these were not



concrete and they did not fit easily into the categorising 'boxes' provided. It was very difficult to define them 'technically' as no language existed for doing so (Poynton & Lazenby 1992) and the deeper meanings of the skill and complexity of the work involved could not be adequately represented. As Field had identified in his 'iceberg' analogy, the technical aspects of a skill are literally only the tip. By focusing attention on these a trivialisation and concretisation of complex ways of knowing and working reduces them to emaciated 'competencies'.

The point here is that not only is work complex and impossible to reduce to a behaviourist competency framework with integrity, but also the problems are further compounded by the gendering of skill. Not only those managing the malestream discourse but women workers themselves view the skills required in 'service' functions as 'natural', as part of the talents of women, as a gendered role associated with their 'biological function' as carers and nurturers.

This, we argue, aligns the 'domestic work' of the workplace, any workplace, with reproductive rather than productive work. Such alignment extends to the (de)valuing of the essential role of this work and its outcomes. This domestic work of the workplace includes such aspects as the repair and maintenance of interpersonal relationships through mechanisms such as 'chat' (see Poynton & Lazenby 1992, pp. 11-12 for an example), the informal conveyance of information, the setting up and maintenance of workplace rituals and 'managing up' to convey information, advice, support and challenge to supervisors.

Feminised work practices of a collaborative nature, incorporating values that have permeated the work ethos in service industries, and women's services and community services in particular, have been internalised as normative in these fields. The challenge from the community services sector to the hegemonic competency frameworks discussed earlier is that of workers involved in formal consultations on how competencies should be framed for this 'industry' insisting on the inclusion of not only attitudes but values and ideologies (Emery 1992a, p. 14; Emery 1992b). Such inclusions would constitute a major disruption to the established frameworks. The industrial relations implications are interesting to contemplate.

The absence of context in the malestream frameworks provides another difficulty. Community and neighbourhood house coordinators insisted that the logical starting point of a skills analysis was to set their work in its social/cultural, demographic, economic and political context(s), focused around their clients and the mission statements of the neighbourhood house(s). The context and conditions under which work was taking place was also emphasised in national community services consultations (Emery 1992a, p. 16). This incorporated the setting (e.g. community-based, religious, feminist); the issue/prob-

lem (e.g. sexual abuse); the internal conditions (e.g. staffing levels, caseloads) and the external conditions (e.g. legislation).

We have found repeatedly that the job descriptions which women workers in these industries and occupations possess (if there is a job description) and the actual work being done are often markedly different, with the actual job being far more complex, diverse and 'responsible' than the description. This raises obvious issues in terms of which skills to describe (are the skills required to fill in for one's immediate manager to be included or not?). More complex dilemmas involve workers' concerns that if all skills *are* identified these will become an 'official' part of the job, rather than an 'extra' over which they can exercise some control (Butler, Connole & Orr 1992). In community services this issue interacts with the blurring of the boundary between paid and unpaid work, especially for part-time paid workers who in fact work full-time.

In clerical work, job/role discrepancies were frequently found in technology applications, particularly in computing and computer-based administration, including financial administration. The design and maintenance of complex and valuable software systems was acknowledged with a 'We couldn't do without her'. Often the woman concerned has trained herself, put in long unpaid hours and was the only person who could explain/maintain the system, and train others to use it.

It is not our intent to reify/romanticise either women's work or the poor work practices which lead to these dilemmas. It becomes obvious that many jobs had blown out to what one woman worker described as a 'superwoman syndrome'. This is exploitative. The issue raises paradoxical questions around the tensions between acknowledging the work which is implicitly expected, or which the job is structured to include without recognition, and reinforcing such practices. Reactions that we have encountered to such dilemmas by both workers and management/employers are complex. For women workers, amazement at the enormity of what they actually did was common, as were both pride in their achievements and concern at potential loss of control of the work. Employers responded with denial, irritable claims that women 'took on too much' or alarm followed by 'this shall cease'.

Jackson (1991) in a discussion based on the work of Reimer (1987) who studied Canadian clerical workers suggests that common employer reactions to these dilemmas involve careful structuring of personnel documents to exclude complex skills. These documents function as a 'control language' which permits higher level skills to be appropriated by management/supervisors while continuing to be performed by clerical workers, processes referred to by Reimer as 'job tunnelling' and 'shearing'.

'Job tunnelling' and 'shearing' are central to the 'invisibility' and appropriation of the skills of women. As in the case of job evaluation ... the problem is not just what we fail to notice. The problem is rather a highly technical and professional practice by which the complexity of work and the skills and knowledge of female workers are reassigned to those above them in the job hierarchy (Reimer 1987). Positions organised in this manner are 'gendered' before individuals are hired into them (Reimer 1987; Acker 1989; Cassin 1990). This feature of organisational and job design is central to the growing observation that gender is not just a feature of individuals, but a particular way of organising institutional life. (Jackson 1991, p. 24)

The appropriation of knowledge by 'job shearing' can be contested. In the national community services consultations on competency standards (Emery 1992a, 1992b) knowledge, it is argued, needs to be specified in competency standards as 'in community services ... much of the knowledge underpinning performance is not clear from merely observing behaviour' (Emery 1992a, p. 12). Different types of knowledge were identified, including 'situational knowledge, knowledge of people, practical knowledge, conceptual knowledge and knowledge of self' (Emery 1992b, p. 21).

The language of competencies fails to differentiate between different 'knowledges' and treats knowledge unproblematically as that which is demonstrable in performance only (National Training Board 1991a, p. 18). From feminist perspectives knowledge is grounded in the personal, experientially and contextually, and is simultaneously socially constructed and a site of struggle expressed through language (the personal is political). Knowledge is embedded in who women *are*, rather than in the 'outputs' of their work. As such the language in which they express it is not the language of outcomes. It blurs the public and private spheres, being drawn from both, and is holistic rather than reductionist.

Women workers in the projects we have been involved in, when describing their jobs, were holistic in their approach. They found it initially difficult to switch to a framework where jobs had to be broken down into discrete 'duties' and 'tasks', and translated into 'competencies' comprised of outcome-based 'units and elements' (National Training Board 1991a).

Poynton and Lazenby (1992) expand the discussion of dilemmas around language in their analysis of women's descriptions of their workplace skills, following interviews with women workers across a range of clerical occupational settings. In pursuing a discussion of gendered language socialisation they note:

The effect of this kind of socialisation, or 'training' girls receive in using talk to pay attention to others is that many more women than men are regarded as 'good listeners', as helpful and cooperative, as willing to subordinate their own desires to the interests of others. But note how this version of women as interpersonal communicators has made invisible the things that women *do* with language and speaks only of what women *are*, as if skills in interpersonal communication were simply a matter of personal qualities or 'personality'. Such 'translation' of skills into personal attributes is an issue that will be taken up again in discussion about the invisibility of women's skills. (Poynton & Lazenby 1992, p. 12)

What Poynton and Lazenby's project makes clear is that the language itself which women use to talk about their work is profoundly gendered. To 'fit' into the technical-rational a whole new (economic rationalist) language must be learned, one where 'I'm good with people' becomes 'I use my ability to read body language and my negotiation skills in order to identify potential conflict and resolve it before it becomes disruptive' (Women's Adviser's Unit 1992).

The contestation of 'skill' in the gendered workplace and the ways in which women's ways of knowing/working are positioned to interrupt the mainstream discourse can be seen throughout the previous discussion. What is paradoxical is that, simultaneously, the cost of claiming space becomes a new 'obedience' to the technical-rational. We struggle to interpret the jargon of competency techno-babble to women workers; we refer to the NTB's mythical crane driver as an illustration (National Training Board 1991a). Boarding the bullet express results in having our knowledges/ways of working shorn/trimmed/boiled down/imploded into remnants of what was once a whole.

In our own work on competency standards development we discovered how difficult it was to keep gendered knowledge, attributes and skills, those 'other' than the frankly technical, in the framework at all. We 'lost' them so many times in the long process of translation into standards that it became something of a standing joke among the team. Ultimately we were able to retain some of the material but with a profound sense of dis-ease at what had fallen through the net of our weaving.

## Women and the training debate

What are the issues for women workers and training? This debate is bound intimately with the contestation of skills and industrial relations matters. The following quotation sets education and training firmly within the microeconomic reform agenda.

... training and award restructuring are inextricably linked. The success of award restructuring and along with it, the emphasis on skills formation, will depend largely on developing the training strategies and systems capable of meeting the needs of the workforce and of the economy.

These goals require special attention and consideration of the specific position of women in the labour market ... Women will be the major source of new labour. Given this significant change in the structure of Australia's workforce, there need to be fundamental changes in attitude to the issue of training women, if we are to maximise our opportunities. (George 1991, p. 22)

The task of training was to increase productivity; it was viewed as the 'imperative' in this quest (Speed 1990, p. 16). It was to be used to upskill/multi-skill the workforce, building upon established competency standards using the (CBT) outcomes-based model. The dilemmas for women workers in this framework have been discussed in the previously.

Tensions between education and 'training' have been reactivated in this context. Historically, vocational training, linked to strongly unionised trades gendered as male, has been identified with the learning of skills for the workplace (Reimer 1992) while 'education' has been linked more to 'discipline-based' knowledge and less closely to the workplace. The current insertion of generic competencies into the school system (Mayer Committee 1992; ESFC 1992) and the pressure on universities through the development of competency standards for the professions (Gonczi, Hagar & Oliver 1990) marks another site of contestation, directly linking education/training and work.

The endorsement of training reform as a central feature of the reform agenda was initially viewed as unproblematic, at least at the level of rhetoric (Speed 1990, p. 16). The reform agenda was given further impetus by Federal Training Guarantee Legislation imposing training expenditure requirements on both public and private sector employers.

In the same way that high hopes were expressed for the benefits of award and industry restructuring, women welcomed the opportunity for greater involvement in formal vocational training and the benefits that were expected to flow from it. It was hoped that women's skills would be comprehensively identified, especially those beyond the narrowly technical such as interpersonal and communication skills, and would become part of the mainstream training agenda. The benefits of this would include 'proper' valuation and rewarding of such skills. Skills acquired informally through life experience and on-the-job training could be accredited through recognition of prior learning (RPL). Literacy, numeracy and English as a second language classes might become an integral component of workplace training.

Access to training was identified as a key issue. Child-care, the times and locations of training courses and access by part-time workers, outworkers and volunteers were all of significance. It was argued that modularised and flexible forms of training would benefit women workers. Cultural sensitivities in multicultural workforce groups would also require attention. There was hope that women workers' improved participation in training would lead to new structured off-the-job training in industries and occupations where training had not previously been available. Clear integration between on-the-job/off-the-job and informal/formal training systems with appropriate RPL and certification/accreditation would improve job mobility, both vertical and horizontal, across sectors and industries. The linking of training to career paths to take women out of broadly classified base level 'dead-end jobs' involved the matching of newly restructured awards with expanded classification structures to appropriate skill recognition and training opportunities. The industrial relations issue of the establishment of classification relativities based on 'gender-neutral' comparability of skill levels and experience was recognised as critical in the struggle for pay equity (George 1991, pp. 22-5; Maclachlan 1990).

Training was presented in the official rhetoric as the panacea that would right the wrongs of inequity and restore the 'level playing field' (Dawkins 1988). In our own work we have found that women workers in community services and clerical sections want 'training', strongly believing that they have been missing out on opportunities, both financial and developmental, which more favourably placed workers are enjoying. However, as Jackson notes:

The crux of the matter is that training is never neutral. It is a battlefield for a broader struggle over knowledge and power in work. The questions at stake are how working knowledge will be organised, whose experience will it represent and whose interests will be served. Training is not the answer to these questions, it is the form of the struggle. (Jackson 1991b, p. 30)

If training is the form of the struggle the challenge is to understand/unpack the discourses that support the various positions. Again, human capital theory and Fordist assumptions form the basis for competency-based training. Training is used to shape and reshape the organisation of work, including the incorporation of new technology (Jackson 1991a; Welton 1991; Jill Blackmore's paper).

In contrast to the oversimplified agenda of CBT training, Welton (1991) cites Offe (1985) to unpack the problematic nature of the relationship between the (tertiary) service sector and the technical-rational.

Offe believes that we cannot assume that the organisation of work in our (partially) industrial, (partially) postindustrial society is internally coher-

ent, able to be unified in terms of a technical, instrumental rationality. Work is vastly differentiated, diverse and heterogeneous. The basic distinction which is required to make sense out of work in our time is the difference between 'productive' and 'service' forms of labour.

... In the tertiary sectors, work has become more reflexive. The work of teaching, curing, planning, organising, negotiating, controlling, administering and counselling is not easily Taylorised. In fact, these 'people-producing' jobs require the learned skills of 'interactive competence, consciousness of responsibility, and acquired practical experience empathy' (Offe 1985, p. 138). Those working in the tertiary sector (e.g. nurses) do acquire technical (formal, rational) expertise as well as moral and practical understandings (normatively based, substantive rationality). These two rationalities (or learning axes) are dissimilar, and often clash. (Welton 1991, pp. 23-4)

Offe's analysis points to further explanations of why 'skills' in service work are difficult to capture and why this sector presents such a challenge to the mainstream discourse.

Training 'provision' in the service sector has been informal, on-the-job and 'sitting next to Nellie'. This form of training exhibits continuities with women's work in the private sphere, representing cooperative learning models with continuous links to earlier social forms, still current in so-called 'preliterate' societies (Butler, forthcoming). This approach is intrinsically flexible, proactive and effective.

Nevertheless, as training arrangements have been historically structured in the context of gendered skills in the gendered workplace, 'sitting next to Nellie' has been highly problematic for women workers. Despite its potential advantages, the non-recognition and non-valuing of this form of training has contributed to and further reinforced the labelling of women's work as unskilled. Reimer (1992) draws upon the work of Gaskell (1986) in her analysis of the 'image of skill' created by male trade work, where formal extended off-the-job training contributed to the perception of the work as highly skilled. Training may be extended beyond the time necessary to learn core skills in order to enhance the status of the work.

In contrast, as Reimer shows, women clerical workers have been unable to utilise industrial bargaining power to achieve formal off-the-job training provision of sufficient length to bolster their claims to 'skill' (Reimer 1992, pp. 29-30). Further, Gaskell notes that 'training programs can help create 'skilled' workers through limiting access to jobs and institutionalising and mystifying the skills involved' (1991, p. 16).

As Gaskell (1991) warns, even getting access to formal accredited training may not automatically flow through into higher status and pay equity. Credentialism in economies experiencing high unemployment rates may result in requirements for higher qualifications with no pay increases. In public sector employment or non-government community services organisations dependent on public sector financing, recessionary times limit the perceived capacity and willingness to fund pay increases no matter how many skill-based arguments are advanced.

To summarise, old forms of on-the-job training and new forms of CBT-based training can both be regarded as problematic for women workers in the service sector. Similarly, a deeper analysis of the discourses of the training agenda suggests that early hopes and expectations will need to be tempered. As Jackson (1991b, p. 30) notes 'training opens up a hornets' nest of power and privilege'.

## Concluding discussion

This paper represents 'ideas in conversation' (Martin 1985) between the authors and between women with whom we worked. Further, in our effort to create spaces for dialogue among women, the theme of this paper became the focus of an international conference presentation in 1992. Workshop participants while confirming the deeply political work of contesting mainstream/malestream definitions of skill, shared ideas and experiences relating to the paradoxical situation in which we found ourselves. While expressing some ambivalence about entering into relation with the debate, even if positioned as oppositional, all spoke of hopes for changing gendered structures, of the potential, through the redefining of skill, and recognition and valuing of 'women's skills', to influence positive change in Australian workplaces and practices. Participants agreed that current opportunities to redress gender inequities around longstanding workplace issues make women's active involvement in the current debate imperative. The issues named included: job (re)design, career paths and access to training, pay equity, the need for flexible work organisation that recognised workers' family responsibilities and the need for a 'fair go' for part-time and casual workers. However, while identifying the need to claim spaces in which to intervene, challenge and act, common themes in the dialogue revolved around feelings of isolation and alienation, of frustration and anger.

The feelings of isolation and alienation linked directly with the dualisms that silence and marginalise, and form the basis of the gendered norms that prescribe definitions and constructs of work and skill. The language and texts



of the reform debate, described as 'neutral', positivist, technical/rational, and reductionist, heightened feelings of alienation, through the decontextualising of workers, their work and work knowledge. This isolation was reinforced by the potential for slices of hierarchical modularised training, based on reductionist and non-inclusive definitions of skill/competencies, to alienate workplace learners further from the broader socioeconomic and political contexts in which they work and learn.

Participants spoke of the notion of 'training as punishment', where workers reacted to assumptions that *individual* lack of the 'right skills' or 'skill mix' was a basis of the recession. Resistance to training, given this burden of resentment and guilt with its inherent (personal) responsibility for Australia's, or an organisation's future, does little to engender a positive and proactive learning culture in workplaces. Training can become a threat in its implication of incompetence in the present, and possible erosions of self-esteem. The challenge of reclassifying oneself as a learner after a distant and often unsatisfactory school experience is silenced by the assumption that all workers will willingly undergo training.

Feelings of frustration and anger were acknowledged as legitimate responses to the force of the resistance to gender equity in the workplace. Gains are slow, and sometimes appear small, given the vision of change and the intensity of intellectual, emotional and physical work invested in moving towards it. Working for change from the oppositional site of Other in gendered structures and workplaces requires persistence, vigilance and optimism.

Despite the acknowledgment of tensions, contradictions and dangers associated with engagement in the skill/training agenda, women remain involved, and optimistic. Training is viewed hopefully as a 'good thing'. We agree that potential does exist for training-related projects in the mainstream to produce useful outcomes for women. Of our own projects, one continues with the production of workplace-based curriculum packages in flexible delivery format which are directly related to the training needs identified by community and neighbourhood house coordinators. These are accreditable in DETAFE and university courses in South Australia and have mechanisms for recognition of prior learning (RPL) available (Neale, with Butler & Connole 1992).

In a competency standards pilot project in South Australia which is ongoing the draft standards have been used in industrial reclassification negotiations and will form the basis for the first formal training offered specifically for the occupational group of school assistants/teacher aides. The standards developed in this project were particularly focused on the identification of women's 'gendered' competencies and, notwithstanding the difficulties noted earlier, captured them more fully than any other competency standards

we have seen (Connole, Hypatia & Butler 1992; Neville 1992).

Another example in Victoria is that after a case lasting over three years, a new competency-based career structure for clerical and administrative employees has been awarded by the State Industrial Relations Commission and aligned against the Metals Industry Award, with a relativity of 100 per cent of level 3 clerical work to the metal industry tradesperson (Equal Pay Newsletter 1992, p. 7). This is described as a 'landmark' decision, acknowledging the skills of office workers acquired through on-the-job learning as equivalent to skills acquired through formal trade training. The career structure is expanded from three to six steps and will link to training provision (Equal Pay Unit 1992).

A final irony in this concluding scenario is that, just as we reach this stage, the debate moves on. The positioning of the Victorian State Clerical Award is problematic, following the Kennett Liberal government changes to its industrial relations legislation. This model could be followed in other states and nationally. The move to enterprise bargaining has been clearly identified as a threat to the working lives of women in terms of loss of pay equity, established conditions such as maternity leave and access to the 'fruits' of workplace restructuring (Carapellucci 1992; Women's Electoral Lobby 1992). One of the major threats of enterprise bargaining is that of dispersal: the web of restructured meanings, experiences and understandings that women have constructed together (including acknowledgments of difference(s) and areas of internal contestation and struggle) will be fragmented. In this scenario, the prospect of localised sites where two groups of men barter away our hopes and achievements is a destination we can unite in not choosing.

In the optimism of feminism, those who, like us, have an active and passionate interest in moving towards workplaces based on principles of gender equity and social justice, continue to work from within and without mainstream agendas, contesting, challenging, and critiquing. The politicisation of skill continues as a site for struggles over meaning, knowledge, practices and power in workplaces, a site in which we claim spaces to act and to be.

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# THE GENDERING OF SKILL AND VOCATIONALISM IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION

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While the notion of skill has many common-sense assumptions, this paper considers the ways in which the concept of skill, as a central element of a discourse of vocationalism which has surfaced in periods of social and economic dislocation during 20th-century education, has taken on different meanings in particular historical circumstances. Skill is a social construct. It is critical to the process of the gendering of work. It has become the central issue in recent policy seeking to make education serve more effectively the needs of industry, policy which has largely been informed by human capital theory. This paper suggests that not only does the human capital model provide a narrow and a historical view of the education-work nexus, but the claim that skill is technically defined and neutral masks the ideological and political work that such concepts do, when uncritically accepted, in exacerbating the gendered division of labour. The paper traces historically how the dominant concept of skill has shifted in 20th-century Australia from being job- and content-specific to a more generic view of skill which includes not only cognitive, technical and operational skills but also social and affective skills in ways which differentially affect youth according to gender and class. Educational policy and school practice has in general responded to the 'skilling thesis' in relatively uncritical ways. In so doing, the effect has been in some instances to produce conservative outcomes when the intention has been to empower individuals and particular social groups, e.g. through the acquisition of 'vocational' skills.

Central to the numerous educational and economic reform reports which have emerged during the 1980s and early 1990s, both at the state and national level

in Australia, is the notion of skilling. Rapid change in the workplace is seen to require recurrent training and upgrading of the skill base of the Australian labour force. For example, in the federal policy statement, *Skills for Australia* (Dawkins & Holding 1987), it is argued that, in order to improve Australia's internal market competitiveness in manufacturing and the service sector, Australia will 'require a more highly skilled and better educated workforce' (Dawkins & Holding 1987, p. 8). Education and training are seen to be the keys to developing this skills base. Statements about 'the skill demands of new technology' and 'skilling for the national interest' are now starting points from which policy is developed. (See Department of Employment, Education and Training 1989; Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs 1988; Finn 1991.) This 'language of skills', which has assumed different formulations in different times, has largely been translated uncritically into educational policy, usually without clarification. It has provided the rationale for state and federal governments' restructuring of tertiary education, post-compulsory school reorganisation as well as curriculum and assessment reform. While intended to link education more closely to the economy and the labour market, this reorganisation of school and work is also couched in terms of equity and fairness, 'as preserving and extending the national commitment to democracy and social justice' (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1987, p. 8; see also Dawkins 1988; *Australia Reconstructed* 1987). Skilling (through education, training and specific skill programs, e.g. Skillshare) is therefore rhetorically linked to improving the position of the traditionally disadvantaged (working class, rural, Aboriginal and female students).

The 'language of skills' of the 1980s is based on a number of assumptions. First, that Australia is moving into a post-industrial society which, in turn, requires a new type of productive worker who is 'flexible', 'adaptable' and 'multi-skilled'. In a 'post-industrial society', it is assumed that there has been a shift away from the Fordist organisation of work which accompanied industrialisation (Matthews *et al.* 1988). Fordism is characterised by a vertical and hierarchical organisation of work, distinguishing between management and labour on the basis of the separation of the conception from the execution of labour power. This strict division of labour permeates the organisation, with a high degree of specialisation and routinised labour. Post-Fordism, by contrast, is premised on the view that quality, innovation and production control can best be handled by front-line producers and not centralised managers. Post-Fordism emphasises decentralisation, support teams and localised decision making. The emphasis is not on top-down control but on horizontal communication between relatively autonomous production units which can, because of their flexibility and adaptability, meet the needs of the consumers better

(Murray 1991). The post-Fordist worker must therefore be an adaptable, innovative problem solver possessing a package of generic skills which are transferable across different worksites (Watkins 1990). Different views of skill implicit in the Fordist or non-Fordist perspectives, therefore, carry with them differing implications about how education should prepare youth for work and further training for adults (Meyer 1991).

Second, the 'language of skills' tends to assume a technologically progressivist and determinist stance. It is progressivist in that technology is presumed to bring positive benefits to society in general in that it requires a higher level of technological sophistication and expertise from all members of society (e.g. Myer Committee 1980). It is determinist in that it assumes that technology 'determines' the way in which work is organised. That is, skills are technically defined, rather than the position that technology, as skill, is socially constructed in ways which suit particular interests, whether it be male labour or capital.

Third, while education and training focus on individualised skills, there is the assumption that skilling the individual will have national benefits through aggregation. Since 1987, the notion of skills has been central to the arguments about education making Australia more productive and competitive internationally through 'restructuring' as laid down in *Australia Reconstructed* (1987). This involves changes in the workplace regarding both the roles and skill requirements of workers and is critical to the renegotiation of wages awards. New awards in the 'education industry' link productivity gains to the upgrading of skills with the creation of the Advanced Skills Teacher. The assumption is that there is a direct link between credentials and skilling, between individual skills and national productivity. More people, it is argued, are gaining higher credentials in order to meet the demands of more skilled occupations (Myer 1980, p. 102), although it is more likely that the credentialing spiral is a consequence of scarcity of educational places and jobs (in February 1992, unemployment ran at 10–11% and up to 30,000 qualified students did not gain tertiary places (*The Age*, 20 February 1992)).

The language and logic of 'skilling' is a particularly well-articulated strand of the discourse of vocationalism which has been loudly articulated in various periods of economic and social dislocation in Australia and other western welfare capitalist states during the 20th century. This discourse has invariably linked schools to work at the macro level in a more instrumental, economically functional manner. As a set of organised systematic meanings represented through state policy, the media, education—and which become part of common sense—the discourse of vocationalism shapes everyday practices, it encourages certain possibilities and limits others by defining concepts in particular ways. For example, at the macro level, during each of the economic

recessions of the 1890s, 1930s and 1970s, education was initially blamed for its failure to prepare youth adequately for work, both attitudinally and skillwise. Yet there emerged in the latter phases of each economic downturn the view that education could also provide a solution for the economic ills of the nation through the upgrading of the skills of youth (Bessant 1988). The tension over whether education is the problem or the solution has in some instances led to a shift away from the general notion of 'education for citizenship' (usually associated with liberal education) during the prosperous 1950s and 1960s towards an instrumental and economic view of education serving the economy through the development of individualised skills in the 1980s. What differs in each of these periods is the extent to which the state has been prepared to intervene and, more specifically, to fund the 'upgrading' of the skill of the individual, specific groups or the population at large, although the state has been active in contributing to the discourse (Blackmore 1991).

At the micro level, whilst skill definitions shape in concrete ways the experiences and opportunities of specific groups of youth, the language of skill utilised in the policy discourse tends to use the term in a universal and all-inclusive manner to include a range of activities, from using a cash register to using a lathe. This lack of clarity is in part due to uncertainty as to *actual* technical skill requirements arising from rapid changes in the labour process as well as the gap between policy and what actually occurs in practice. But the universal claims of the skilling thesis at the macro level also obscure the political and social aspects of skill—about who acquires what skills and to whose benefit—and thus serves an ideological function. This ideological aspect is critical at times of scarcity of educational places and employment due to the social selection function of credentials (which supposedly signify skills). Debates which tend to focus on the vocational function of education (and how it should respond to the skill demands of the workplace) are really about who is taught what curriculum, how and by whom. Invariably vocational education is seen to be the lesser alternative to the hegemonic academic curriculum, an alternative which targets 'disadvantaged' or 'at risk' groups (Blackmore 1986).

This paper, which is informed by a larger historical and empirical study, looks at the notion of skill as it has altered since the late 19th century; of how, as a major element of the wider discourse of vocationalism, historically and gender-specific notions of skill were produced and maintained as 'givens' (Blackmore 1986). Whereas vocationalisation tends to mean the formal linking of education to work (apprenticeship, vocational and career guidance, work education), the discourse of vocationalism refers to how the education-work relationship is discursively constituted in ways which shape the activities of individuals and social groups. In the paper, I first critique from a feminist

perspective two dominant theoretical frameworks, that of human capital and labour process theory, because of their emphasis on skill and the implications this has for education. Second, I illustrate how, despite the common elements which are present in the discourse of vocationalism (to 'upgrade the skills of school leavers' and to make the curriculum 'more vocationally relevant') there are important differences in what is meant by key concepts such as 'skills' and 'vocational' in specific historical contexts, differences premised on how work is seen to be organised, on different perceptions as to the 'needs' of the nation and the 'needs' of the individual according to their class and gender. In turn these presume particular notions of the learner and the worker. Finally, I consider how the language of skills is framing the reshaping of secondary and tertiary education since the mid-1980s, with particular reference to the implications of this for women and girls. My analysis focuses on the conceptualisation of skill in the official rhetoric or policy text in the light of commercial education which provided for girls an occupation which was 'feminised' at the turn of the century. I argue that despite the post-Fordist rhetoric, government reports on labour markets, the economy and education still carry with them many common-sense 'Fordist' assumptions about the nature of skills: that skills are concrete, can be readily categorised, are technically defined and neutral.

## **Theoretical frameworks informing the education and skills debate**

Two opposing theoretical frameworks have tended to dominate the ways in which the education-work nexus has been conceptualised—human capital theory derived from mainstream neo-classical economics and labour process theory derived from Marxism. In each the notion of skill has been central. 'Human capital' theory has tended to dominate the official view of the school-work link during the 20th century. It presumes an instrumental view of the relationship between school and work. At a macro level, human capital theory assumes an essentially structuralist-functionalist view of the education-society relationship. It presumes a direct, linear and positive correlation between education and technology, education and individual productivity, education and national economic productivity. At the micro level, the model can be summarised thus: education is an investment which benefits both the individual (and the nation) in that education proportionally increases the potential for individual effort (productive work) and the economic rewards gained from this effort. Individual gain is then aggregated to produce national productivity. Education is viewed as an investment, a matter of individual choice. Skills

acquired through education are transferable to work. Educational credentials indicate the level and nature of these skills. The individual is rewarded in proportion to the amount of that investment in education as signified by credentials. The longer one invests in education, the greater the economic rewards. In this model, women's lower economic rewards are a consequence of individual 'choice' not to invest in longer periods of training as they give priority to their family responsibilities rather than due to discrimination or structured disadvantage (Woodhall 1973; Strober 1990).

But the human capital model which has increasingly informed educational policy is empirically and historically inaccurate as a depiction of the choices, options and experiences available to many men, largely working class and/or non-Anglo Celtic, and most women. The emphasis on the labour market and the role of education in supplying labour-market needs assumes, first, that there is a labour market in which individuals freely compete on the basis of their skills as signified by the educational credentials they possess. Second, human capital theory argues that discrimination by employers on the basis of gender, race or class is 'irrational' because unprofitable, as the most qualified candidate would not necessarily be employed. That is, there is a direct correlation between the level of education and life chances (Rumberger 1987, pp. 324-6). Third, the mechanism of the labour market, it is argued, is neutral. Criticisms of human capital theory have focused first on the failure to recognise the screening, symbolic and cultural value of credentials, which undermines any notion of them as neutral mechanisms of fair selection; second, on the fact that the problem is as much one of demand as of supply; and, third, that human capital theory has ignored the *sexual* division of labour as central to the workings of the labour market and of capital itself (O'Donnell 1984; Marginson 1990). Indeed, labour-market research has indicated that girls and women, who are more successful educationally and whose work is often more cognitively complex, do not achieve the same economic rewards and promotional opportunities as their male counterparts with equivalent qualifications, a factor exacerbated by labour-market segmentation and employer discrimination (Strober 1990).

The major critique of this 'skilling thesis' has been undertaken by labour process theorists, initiated largely by the work of Harry Braverman in *Labour and Monopoly Capital* in 1974. Braverman argued that, despite the demand for higher education qualifications in general, close historical analysis suggested that technology had in fact led to a general *trend* of deskilling or dispossession of 'the mass of workers from the realms of science, knowledge and skill' since 1900 whilst at the same time increasing the specialisation and skills of a small segment of the workforce, the managers and technicians (Braverman 1974, p.

426). Moreover, he argued that this polarisation between those who conceived the organisation of work and technology and those who executed these plans on the workshop floor facilitated the process of accumulation of wealth by the few, generally white male middle-class professionals. Certainly, labour-market research has supported some aspects of Braverman's account. Future labour-market demands in the USA, UK and Australia suggest the increasing polarisation of labour between the majority of workers, most of them women, being concentrated in increasingly semi-skilled or unskilled labour and a minority of 'highly skilled' technicians, professionals and managers, usually male (Rumberger 1987). Australian research indicates that the demand for skilled workers, particularly in hi-tech industries and engineering, is not as great or universal as the skilling thesis claims (Marginson 1990; Sweet 1987). Employment trends indicate that the greatest area of expansion in employment is in casual and part-time labour for women in jobs not requiring skills or an upgrade in skills, in what could be described as Fordist work organisation in which there is little worker autonomy and more repetitive work. This deskilling is also evident in the peripheral labour markets facilitating more 'flexible manufacturing' (Watkins 1990).

Both Braverman's deskilling hypothesis and labour process theory, as well as human capital theory, have been criticised for their claims of universality and determinism. The proliferation of empirical and historical evidence arising from Braverman's publications suggests that the processes of 'deskilling' and 'reskilling' often occur simultaneously, affecting individuals, worksites and social groups differently and often in contradictory ways.

The major points of the critique revolve around Braverman's romantic view of labour, his neglect of class consciousness, his neglect of valorisation, his neglect of gender issues, his neglect of trade union resistance, his failure to see the possibility of re-skilling and hyperskilling—indeed his poor conception of skill itself—his over emphasis on Taylorism and de-emphasis on other forms of job design and his universalistic view of the de-skilling process. (Burrell 1990, p. 277)

Added to this could be the failure to recognise other 'hegemonic' regimes which elicit workers' consent (Vallas 1990). Braverman's definition of skill is equally limited because it is tuned to the 'craftsman, and is wary of 'relativist' definitions.

Feminists, meanwhile, have critiqued human capital (Woodhall 1973; Strober 1990) and labour process theory (West 1990; O'Donnell 1984) for their assumptions as to the universality of the white middle-class male experience. In particular human capital theorists and psychologists look at skill as the

objective property of the worker which can be measured, what Attewell calls the positivist approach to skill. Feminist critiques draw largely from the social constructivist approach to skill which suggests that skill is socially and historically constructed in ways which favour particular individuals and social groups (Attewell 1990). 'Skill' should be seen as being relative, for example, to previous experience; and context-bound in that it does not exist without prior knowledge and a framework within which it is defined. Indeed, skill takes on new meanings in specific historical contexts and different worksites. For example, we may think of someone being skilled in the use of a lathe, sewing machine or computer. But empirical research indicates that each of these 'skills' is judged differently according to how the skills are acquired (training/experience), who possesses the skills (male/female, adult/youth) and in what context these skills are used (public/private). Individuals are generally only seen to have expertise or 'skill' when such a skill is associated with paid work and when such skills have been acquired through training. Particular types of skills such as social skills (e.g. interpersonal and emotional management) and operational skills (carrying out routine tasks), which are generally possessed by women, are less highly valued (and paid) or defined as being a lesser skill than other types of skills. Manual, strength-related skills and technical skills which have connotations of expertise, those generally possessed by men, receive higher remuneration and status.

These dichotomies have developed historically, largely because it has been male workers who have had the opportunity and capacity, primarily through guild activity in the 16th century which institutionalised male-dominated craft skills through the law and then more recent union activity, to demand recognition for the types of skills they have acquired and frequently monopolised to the exclusion of women. Indeed, male unionists have been complicit with male management in excluding women's acquisition of the more valued skills (craft, management and technological). Women's work has therefore generally been stereotyped and statistically and legally categorised as unskilled as much because they have lacked the industrial strength to define it otherwise and not due to any real difference in actual content or technical knowledge. As Nancy Jackson comments:

The concept of skill involves a complex interplay of technical and social forces. 'Skill is an idea that serves to differentiate between different kinds of work and workers and to organise relations among them. It has been used for many years to protect the interests of those who have power, and so has come to express the interweaving of the technical organisation of work with hierarchies of power and privilege between men and women, whites and non-whites, old and young. (Jackson 1991)



What historians and social constructionists have come to understand and feminists argue is that people take for granted what they are capable of doing and do not view it as a skill. Indeed, the more widely shared the skills tend to be the more they are devalued perceptually, a relevant issue for women's labour (Attewell 1990, p. 431).

At the same time, it needs to be recognised that skill is not merely a social or ideological construct, but is often based on material differences in what men and women do. For example, men tend to work in more capital-intensive work whilst women work in labour-intensive work, although both work with technology (Armstrong 1982; Wajcman 1991). Skill, as Cynthia Cockburn has shown in the printing trade, is also bound up with 'the material of male power' in the workplace in which jobs are gendered because of the actual manifestation of the male physical presence as well as the exclusionary power of the male work culture. Hegemonic masculinity in any particular instance is therefore closely associated with technological competence or linked to images of being the male family provider. Changes in skill definitions and boundaries, therefore, are often actively resisted by male unionists as threatening not only their material situation but also their gendered identity (Cockburn 1983).

Furthermore, what is seen to be skilled is as much a factor of supply and demand, and much of the activity of professionals is to restrict supply of their expertise to a select few and by so doing exclude others, thereby maintaining their position as possessors of highly valued skills (Attewell 1990). The feminisation of an occupation is often synonymous with deskilling and the displacement of women by men leads to an upgrading of skills, as men have many more horizontal and vertical escape exits. Professionalism and craft unionism have largely been built on the power of an elite group of male experts to claim unique skills. Appealing to such notions therefore has ambiguous implications for women. Finally, deskilling is not uniform for all women. The introduction of new information technologies did not necessarily adversely affect women due to a reduction in office jobs, the deskilling of typists whilst increasing productivity, and the incorporation of the monitoring of work into the machinery itself. Empirical studies have indicated that information technology has been incorporated into existing patterns of work and did not lead to a significant deskilling. This is because any universal theory of deskilling ignores the ways in which women workers actively organise to gain greater satisfaction and control, on how they use the machine within specific contexts (Wajcman 1991).

Occupational case studies and historical research have indicated the complexity of the interaction between patriarchy and capital, education and work, suggesting that the interests of one can indeed work in contradictory

ways at some points and converge in other instances. Just because men, both as employers and workers, have in the past and now continue to shape work to protect their labour interests, it does not mean that the gender order is not multidimensional and internally inconsistent in ways which provide space for women workers' resistance and gain, both individually and collectively. What can no longer be denied is that:

... far from being an objective economic fact skill is often an ideological category imposed on certain types of work by virtue of the sex and power of the workers who perform it. Skill has become saturated with sex. It is not that skill categories have been totally subjectified: in all cases some basis was found in the content of the work to justify the distinction between men's and women's work. But the equations—men/skilled and women/unskilled are so powerful that the identification of a particular job with women required that the skill content of the work would be downgraded. (Phillips & Taylor 1980, pp. 79, 85).

Skill is therefore a relational concept, just as is gender. It is how one activity, attribute or form of knowledge is compared with others. What is at issue is not whether deskilling occurs, or whether reskilling is possible, but rather why the gender stereotyping of jobs, with men largely controlling the more highly skilled (and technological) jobs and women the less skilled (social) jobs, has not altered given the inconsistent findings to support more universal and totalising theories. We need to distinguish between the ways in which skill was used to establish initial occupational segregation and how it has been used to maintain gendered divisions of labour.

Likewise, education does not instrumentally serve the economy or organise itself in correspondence to production. The role education plays in either the deskilling or reskilling theses has also been oversimplified and deterministic. Whilst human capital theory emphasises supply-side forces of the labour market (e.g. skills possessed by individual workers) with little reference to the production process, labour process theory has tended to ignore the labour market. In the former perspective, education is an individual investment; in the latter, education systematically reproduces social inequalities based only on class. Neither has a sense of the contradictory relationships in the education-work relationship, nor how work and education must be linked to the family and the gendered subject. Nor do they recognise how various discourses or policies seeking to produce equity (equality of opportunity, vocational education) are translated differentially, even subverted, at the level of practice within specific locations and contexts. This requires investigating small-scale, localised relationships within occupations, organisations and worksites and points

to the need for further historical and process-type case studies (Fincher 1989). Work of this type is already under way. Studies of vocational education in 20th-century Britain (Schilling 1989); corporation schools in early 20th-century USA (Nelson-Rowe 1991); unemployed youth in Victoria in the 1930s (Holbrook 1987); adolescent girls' career choices in 1950s Victoria (Blackmore 1986); work experience programs in the 1970s (Watkins 1987) indicate how vocational schemes intending to produce more malleable and productive workers have often meant targeted youth were less likely to be involved in the workplace in the area in which they were 'trained'.

I have emphasised the human capital model of the education-work relationship and its critics because it underpins the economic, award and educational restructuring in Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s negotiated between the Federal Labor government with the complicity of the male-dominated peak union organisation (the Australian Council of Trade Unions) within the framework of the Economic Accord (1983) (Campbell 1990). Indeed, current trends appear to have assumed what Attewell has described as a positivist approach to skill. This view has dominated economic, sociological, psychological and educational theory for much of the 20th century in the search for more sophisticated and technical ways to categorise and measure skills so that they can be standardised and compared across work situations, rather than questioning the very notion itself.

The next section draws attention to the complex culturally and temporally specific ways in which the state, employers, workers (male and female, individually and collectively) have at critical periods maintained their interests by utilising the language of skill and its various connotations. It seeks to establish how particular notions of skill became 'common sense' in specific historical contexts in highly gendered ways in Victoria.

## Skilling, schooling and the world of work

### *Skilling the 'talented few' for the nation state: 1900-45*

During the first decade after federation of the Australian colonies in 1901 the vocational value of education was being realised as state secondary systems of education were developed and linked formally to work for the first time. Indeed, the Fink Commission on Technical Education (1899-1901) in Victoria perceived the development of agricultural high schools, junior technical schools, continuation schools for elite sectors of the workforce (scientifically informed farmers, skilled tradesmen and teachers) as a necessary condition of national

economic development (Fink Commission 1901). Prior to Federation in Australia in 1901, compulsory elementary education served largely as a mechanism of social and political control. Education was expected to impart that minimal level of functional literacy and numeracy (social rather than vocational literacy) necessary to produce a minimally literate newly enfranchised male citizen capable of voting for the natural leaders amongst the male upper class elite (Selleck 1987).

But there had been a growing pressure since the 1880s from business and political interests to upgrade the technical skills of the more able male members of the working class, principally through technical education. Indeed, by the depression of the 1890s, Pavla Miller observes:

... the proposal for technical education came to reflect more closely the merging division of labour within capitalist enterprises. A large-scale process of de-skilling' was taking place whilst most workers, especially women, were progressively relegated to simple unskilled work. Production knowledge was concentrated in an ever smaller proportion of specially trained employees. Accordingly manufacturer's demands for technical education no longer specified education for all, but called for special training of a handful of leaders of industry. (Miller 1984, p. 408)

It was as much the belief that an industrialising nation *ought* to have a larger skilled workforce as it was a response to actual technical demands (Musgrave 1964). By 1900, therefore, there was a widely accepted view, certainly amongst such key state educational administrators as Frank Tate in Victoria and Peter Board in NSW, that Australian economic development relied on the development of a male elite of skilled craftsmen, professionals and business leaders (Tate 1908). The talented few amongst the working class were to be syphoned off into the state systems of secondary schools, the vocational alternative to the private schools which monopolised the liberal academic curriculum pathway into the professional-managerial class. Working-class suspicions of 'bourgeois' liberal education in the increasingly academic state-run high schools were alleviated as apprenticeship was slowly linked to formal education with the establishment of a junior technical system in 1910 and then the Apprenticeship Act of 1928 which required employers to send apprentices to technical school for specified days each week (Bessant 1971). But the state was only prepared to fund the training of a skilled male elite through the apprenticeship system because it was seen to contribute to national economic development and international stature (Pocock 1988; Blackmore 1986).

Meanwhile, the same Apprenticeship Act of 1928 marginalised and devalued girls' technical education and skills. Retail and service industries in

which girls and women were concentrated were not proclaimed as trades under the Apprenticeship Act until the 1940s, thus automatically excluding the 'female occupations' from the status associated with a trade (Apprenticeship Commission 1946). This was despite the fact that the number of apprentices in the late 19th century for females and males was about equal, particularly in clothing and footwear. In fact, many industrial awards after 1900 forbade women to take up apprenticeships in industries in which they worked (confectionery, leather trade and food production) (Ryan 1987). Anomalies based on gender were well entrenched by 1934 when Miss Woodcock spoke to the Federal Secondary School Teacher's Association Conference about 'hairdressing', not yet included as a registered Apprenticeship trade.

Girls entered industry in a very haphazard way. Women were necessary in industry and an interesting thing was that no move was made to ensure that they entered industry properly skilled and trained. A woman hairdresser was allowed to practise after six months—a very small period of training for a highly skilled occupation. A male barber was not allowed to practise his hairdressing until he had served an apprenticeship for five years ... frequently these untrained women have to return to industry as widows, deserted wives and work on a very low footing. (Victorian Teachers Union 1934).

Girls not only were denied equivalent training in areas where the work was the same or even more technically complex but furthermore they did not receive state funding, as did apprentices, for their training. Most girls were supported by their parents to attend private business schools or training colleges. Their male counterparts, therefore, with longer periods of training, continuity of work experience and different certification were seen to be more 'skilled' although it is arguable whether the actual skill content of the work they did as barbers was in fact less skilled or complex than that of hairdressers (Pocock 1988).

As skill became consistently linked to its acquisition through formal training courses, women were further disadvantaged because they were generally concentrated in the secondary labour market comprising part-time, casual jobs, which characteristically lacked career paths based on experience, credentialing or on-the-job training. Employers perceived women as being 'unreliable' workers rather than seeing that the nature of unskilled work in which women (as youth) were concentrated was boring and likely to have high turnover. In this way, skill and wage differentials were built on historically constructed inequalities.

Together with the male-dominated unions, the state was also active through the newly established federal conciliation and arbitration system, in

defining the nature of 'worthwhile' work and skill. The hierarchy between skilled and unskilled labour, and ultimately men and women's work, was embedded under several industrial awards (McQueen 1983). In particular, the Harvester Judgment of 1907 established the principle of a 'living wage' for the unskilled worker and his family (assuming a dependent wife and two children) without defining 'skill', whilst recognising that it was appropriate for those with skills to demand higher rates (Women's Employment Branch 1990, p. 3). The Harvester Judgment also signalled an ongoing justification for male unionists to enforce skill distinctions (which were largely defined according to the sex of the worker and not the content of the work) in order not only to retain skilled status:

.. but also retain domestic authority .... For them, craft status was identified with manhood and the struggle to maintain their position in the upper level of the labour hierarchy was fuelled by a determination to maintain the traditional balance of power in families where men always acted as the primary breadwinners. (Phillips & Taylor 1980, p. 85)

Indeed, state intervention at this time institutionalised and legitimated the public/private dichotomy embedded in liberal political theory as early as the Enlightenment, a dichotomy which defined the political and the economic as a male enterprise and the social and the personal as female activities. Implicit in the industrial awards is the assumption that the work men did in the *public* domain was more skilled or difficult, dealt with *things* and was therefore more valued whereas what women did was associated with domestic, unpaid labour in the *private* domain, dealt with *people* and was therefore 'unskilled'. The distinction between women's and men's work, once embedded in law and practice, was then used to justify the sexual division of labour as 'natural', 'necessary' and 'commonsensical'. It has continued to justify women's lower wages into the 1990s.

'Skill' differentials in the workplace were thus built on gender stereotypic views of the worker and not on the actual skill demands of the work. These gender stereotypes were in turn informing and informed by a middle-class ideology of domesticity which saw women and girls as only requiring 'pin money' during the period at work between school and motherhood when they shifted their dependency from their father to their husband. Women's economic value for the state lay in the sphere of reproduction, not production. This perspective was reinforced early in the century by fears about racial degeneracy with Asian immigration, and in turn underpinned by theories of eugenics, biological arguments of gender difference and what was 'natural' for women (Bacchi 1990). Similar arguments about reproductive capacities informed leg-

isolation 'protecting' women and girls from hard manual work, which in turn effectively excluded them from capital-intensive labour. Similar arguments of biological difference justified male workers' claims for higher wages on the grounds of their greater (innate) physical strength, and were quickly extended to include the males' 'natural' technical propensity as evidenced in their innate capacity for science and rationality. This was exacerbated with the increased concentration of men in capital-intensive work (mining) and women in labour-intensive work (food processing, clothing). Women were denied remuneration for their so-called 'natural' skills of emotional management and manual dexterity related to their true vocation of motherhood. Instead, these natural 'skills' were to be harnessed for the nation state by training girls in the science of domesticity, educating them for motherhood. Girls' vocational training in domestic science, made compulsory since the early 1900s, was built on the notion that all women had (or should have) the special skills necessary for their predestined future roles as wives, mothers and domestic managers. Indeed, domestic science is the only vocational training or form of education *specifically* created for girls and funded by the state. Coincidentally, it was initiated at a time when there was a shortage in supply of domestic servants for the middle class. The paradox, according to Kerreen Reiger (1988), of the educational arguments for compulsory domestic science was that if women's nurturant skills were innate, why the need to train girls for their 'natural' destiny?

Not only were highly gendered skill definitions institutionalised through the courts and gender-specific forms of training and education, but also through the introduction of new technology. This in turn led to skill redefinitions in ways which benefited some workers, generally male, and not others. This was particularly obvious in the changing gender relations in clerical work and commercial education. Women had entered into the male-dominated commercial field by the end of the 19th century, largely in private offices. Resistance to their entrance into office work was less in such new jobs associated with new technologies (telephonists) regarded as manual work, rather than in existing clerical practices supplanted by new technology (typewriters). In this instance the sexual division of labour was restored through maintaining the distinction between manual work associated with the new technology and mental work (book-keeping and ledger) reserved for male clerks (Pringle 1988; Deacon 1989; Garner 1982; Lowe 1987). The connection between routinised and mechanical work and female-designated labour was further accentuated with the introduction of typewriters, and later audiophones and new work practices (typing pools) in the larger offices of insurance firms, banks and retail stores by the 1930s. The introduction of technology thus facilitated the gender typing of clerical work, whilst disguising the fact that the unequal power relations and

hierarchies embedded in the organisation of office work, although claimed to be a matter of technical necessity, were patriarchal.

Educators reacted to the perceived demand for a more skilled workforce in generally uncritical but often contradictory ways. Take the case of commercial education and clerical work. Prior to the Second World War, parents paid for their daughters' training in private business colleges because it was assumed by employers that, on application for any clerical job, girls would already possess the necessary skills of typing and shorthand. No on-the-job training was available. At the same time, educators wishing to encourage the retention of girls in post-compulsory education consciously competed for clients with the private business schools which had developed earlier in the century to meet middle-class demand for clerical training (Medley 1943). Out of the desire to encourage girls to stay on at school to gain a general education, commercial education became a 'track' within the differentiated system of secondary education. Within this track, teachers trained girls and a few boys in the job-specific skills of typing and shorthand (Blackmore 1986; Gas'kell 1986). They also imparted the social skills associated with the notion of a 'good secretary', and indeed reflected an overt concern with the social and political relations of the office. This was in direct response to employer concern about the 'good work attitudes' of their recruits as much as their vocational skills (stenography, typing), and their expectations that secretaries bring the emotional management skills of domestic labour into the office, indeed humanising the office (for a current analysis of how sexuality and power permeate clerical work see Pringle 1988). To quote one commercial educator: 'A stenographer should have certain skills and a certain standard of morals thus preventing her becoming a machine'. Therefore, commercial teachers saw their role was to 'develop commonsense, accuracy, alertness, initiative, tact and balance' (Archer 1952, p. 21). It was also seen to be practical and natural, due to the hegemony of the ideology of domesticity. This meant women entering clerical work were judged according to particular constructs of femininity and behaviour (social skills of emotional management) and on job-specific technical skills acquired at school (typing and stenography).

Whilst the social skills essential to being a good secretary and possessed by women as their natural virtue were basic conditions of employment and not financially rewarded, the 'natural' order of things dealt their male equivalents a fairer hand (Archer 1952, p. 23). It was suggested that a male clerk, who, by the way, lacked the skills of typing or stenography expected of a female entering clerical work, was 'self made according to *his inherent initiative and ability*' (Martindale 1939). He was to be trained on the job at the expense of the employer after being 'grounded in the elements of more cultural subjects' at school



(Baxter 1937). Girls were not expected to possess educational certificates, but were tested on their expertise in typing and shorthand. Boys entering clerical work were expected to possess a different set of skills. They were required to have undertaken a more 'appropriate' general/liberal education of the classics, literature and maths as symbolised by the possession of the Leaving Certificate. These higher level cognitive skills were then seen to prepare the boys better by providing them with the cultural capital on which specific training in the workplace would build in areas such as accounting. Employers stated the preference that job-specific skills were context-specific and areas which schools did not teach well. That is, the traditional academic curriculum was the 'pre-vocational' education for male white-collar work whilst a more skill-specific curriculum (both technical and social skills) was offered to the girls (Blackmore 1987).

So what was a 'valuable' skill was determined by *who* possessed the skill and *where* it was practised and not merely by the content of the skill. The credential served a symbolic function in the selection of boys, whereas it was irrelevant for girls. Once on the job, the patterns of skill formation which developed in the labour process took on even more disparate paths for male and female clerical workers—the former into what labour segmentation theorists describe as the primary labour market characterised by security, career paths and where further training or skilling led to promotion; the latter described as the secondary labour market characterised by lack of permanence, training and career ladders, where new skills were necessarily acquired through experience without remuneration but necessary to keep employment. In the case of commercial education, skills acquired at school by girls were indeed 'transferable to the labour market' as the human capital argument would suggest, except they were judged (and remunerated) differently from those held by males with similar qualifications in the market according to employer preferences, discriminatory labour practices agreed on by male-dominated unions and gendered stereotypes about what constituted women's and men's work. In the long term, therefore, whilst male clerical workers were temporarily dislocated with the introduction of new technology, they were simultaneously able to reconstruct the definition of 'mental' skill sufficiently to exclude competition from women through their control of union organisations and other institutional and occupational arrangements (Blackmore 1987; Phillips & Taylor 1980; Cockburn 1983).

Finally, the language of skills with all its classist and gendered implications became more pronounced, as did the discourse of vocationalism, during the depression of the 1930s. Education, not the labour market, was blamed for youth unemployment for failing to provide the skills (social, attitudinal and

technical) required in the workplace. Middle-class philanthropists and educators saw technical education in particular (for boys) and vocational education in general (for girls and for less able boys) as the panacea for youth unemployment. Vocational education largely developed in Victoria as a 'watered-down' and lesser version of the competitive academic curriculum for the majority of early school leavers. This 'curriculum of employability' meant teaching the *practical*, gender-specific subjects of domestic science and needlework for girls and woodwork and metalwork for boys, on the assumption that such content would train them in useful *work-related* skills (e.g. manual dexterity, orientation to machinery) but *not* job-specific skills. It was 'practical' and non-technical, imparting a limited form of vocational literacy necessary for unskilled labour compared with the abstract and theoretical knowledge imparted through the academic curriculum, the most successful form of vocational education training for the professions. At the education-labour market interface, vocational guidance and youth employment schemes were created to eradicate the 'mismatch' between the skills possessed by youth and those needed in the labour market, and thus to reduce the number of 'occupational misfits'. The language of skills justified compulsory 'training' of unemployed girls in needlework and domestic arts and unemployed boys in forestry and mechanics in order to receive government and charity 'sustenance'. In actuality, there was little or no training in the sense of technical skills being taught in such schemes. Rather, the emphasis was on the social skills, moral and political, and the inculcation of the work ethic. Furthermore, there was clear evidence that unemployed youth were not all eager and willing to participate in vocational schemes, indicating that familial, educational and other work experiences informed their resistance (Blackmore 1986; Holbrook & Bessant 1986; Shields 1982).

Prior to the Second World War, therefore, the vocationalisation of secondary education exacerbated class and gender differences. Increased curriculum and organisational differentiation meant for the majority the inculcation of appropriate social and attitudinal skills to produce a more malleable and productive workforce; and the imparting of technical and specialist skills to the minority, the male elite who climbed the educational ladder to become technicians, professionals and business leaders. There was little questioning of this social elitism which built on the notion of liberal-meritocracy and theories of social difference (McCallum 1989). At this point, in the popular mind, skills tended to be content- and job-specific and acquired in the workplace or in technical schools, whereas education in the liberal sense, undertaken in schools, was not seen to have any specific job-skill training, although the example of girls' commercial education suggested otherwise. Indeed, employers had a preference that specific skill training be left to them.

### *Skilling individuals for the welfare state 1945–70*

The 'human capital' formulation of the education–economy nexus has its theoretical derivation in the 1950s in the USA but did not emerge in its most coherent form in Australia until after the 'democratic repertoire' of post-war reconstruction (Rowse 1978). This was the period during which Keynesian economics became orthodoxy in most western welfare democracies. It was one of economic prosperity and growth which, viewed retrospectively, is seen perhaps more as an aberration than the norm. The post-war period in Australia was one during which the social democratic settlement became truly embedded, in which full employment and relatively high wages in even unskilled jobs meant both blue- and white-collar male workers were able to reinforce the view of the adequacy of the 'family wage'; when retention rates in state secondary schooling rapidly increased as much due to full employment and high wages meaning parents could afford to improve their children's life chances through further education as due to the high demand for skilled and professional workers (Connell & Irving 1980; Wheelwright & Buckley 1980). Possession of secondary educational credentials of any type meant automatic access to training and further education, and professional and technical qualifications secured long-term employment, seemingly confirming the human capital argument that education meant worthwhile rewards were forthcoming to the individual prepared to forgo earnings for the time and money expended in acquiring them, and that education did impart useful occupational skills. Not surprisingly, sociologists began to describe this period as depicting the 'embourgeoisement' of the worker (Crompton & Mann 1986). Furthermore, in a period of surplus, individual gains were unquestionably seen to be national gains although there is no real evidence that education directly contributed to national economic growth (Maglen 1990). The state, at this point, was prepared to pay for the education of all youth and the training of young males for the public good.

Underpinning this apparent democratisation of secondary education and increased social mobility was a mental/manual divide which reproduced other 'divisions of labour' (Browne 1981). For example, the manual deskilling of the workforce through mechanisation and automation during the 1950s was often considered to have benefits, particularly for women, in removing more workers from dirty and unsafe environments into offices. Furthermore, it was assumed that the area of occupational expansion in white-collar clerical and service work, particularly after the Second World War, constituted as 'upskilling' with the move into mental labour. But in fact mechanisation often meant that married migrant women replaced young males. Furthermore, clerical work

often paid less than manual work in factories. Deacon suggests the above trend indicates more changing authority and class relations between manual and white-collar workers premised on the ideological differentiation between mastery of the general culture and 'savoir faire' on the one hand and particular manual skills on the other, a differentiation which extends from knowing how to write and present ideas to knowing how to speak 'well', both elements of the cultural capital of the middle class. Bureaucratisation and professionalisation of many white-collar jobs meant 'new middle class men not only had the motivation to manipulate the labour market in their favour, but also the power to do so' (Deacon 1989, pp. 218-20), thus intensifying gender segmentation as the distinction between manager and worker grew.

Instead of democratising the workplace, the postwar period saw a widening differential between the career opportunities open to men and women within the internal labour markets of occupations as emerging professions sought to raise their entrance qualifications (e.g. accountants, engineers) and in larger firms as credentials became the basis for promotion in developing organisational hierarchies. Most Australian male employees still worked in small businesses and acquired their skill training in an *ad hoc* manner on the job or through part-time education well into the 1950s. Fordism in the form of vertical hierarchy, specialisation and routinised labour was more widespread and developed earlier in the large public and private bureaucracies in the service sector than in industry. And, as workplace organisation became more hierarchical and specialised during the 1950s, the skills which were required in the labour market were readily specified and categorised by the developing science of industrial psychology. It was believed, in an era of 'scientific management', that attitudinal, cognitive, technical and social skills required in jobs could be readily identified, defined and categorised, and that certain individuals had the capacity to be trained in particular types of skills (Blackmore 1986). Hence, the larger insurance companies, retail stores, banks and the public service provided on-the-job training and career-path development for their male but not their female recruits.

Postwar industrial expansion, new technology and increased domestic markets were seen to demand new skills, requiring a different approach not just to technical training but to education in general. Industrialisation was seen to require a new type of worker. As early as 1936, Ernest P. Eltham, Chairman of the Apprenticeship Commission and Chief Inspector of Technical Schools in the state of Victoria, had anticipated the need for a reconceptualisation of the school-work transition after his visit to America and Europe. He predicted:

The machine is rapidly displacing manual labour with the result that there is no security for the unskilled man; changing methods and processes in

semi-skilled and skilled tradework requires that the training of the individual shall be as much to develop resourcefulness, adaptability to changing conditions; training of those who are foremen, managers, designers, technicians and leaders is essential. (Eltham 1935, p. 93)

James Turner, Principal of the Business Institute, stated in 1945 that 'industry and business today requires not merely a limited number of workers with highly specialised knowledge and skill but a vast number of alert, intelligent, adaptable, fit and willing workers' (Archer 1952, p. 12). Whilst at one level this argued for a general upgrading of skills to benefit the nation, at another Eltham clearly distinguished between the types of skills appropriate for particular sectors of the population. He emphasised how education could inculcate the affective characteristics of the 'good worker' (attitudinal and social skills) for most workers whereas 'training' in technical and cognitive skills was exclusive to managers and professionals and the elite crafts.

Yet the dominant social democratic view of the individual was of the worker citizen, in which the notion of social citizenship presumed a self-determining and civic-oriented individual. Education, therefore, was a good best delivered to individuals who would enjoy this good in community with other individuals in ways which enhanced the good of all (Yeatman 1991, p. 12). This philosophy, which recognised that social background (gender, class) may account for different outcomes, sought to reduce inequality through an education system based on competitive individualism and the meritocracy. The emphasis in this period was on child-centred pedagogy and individualised curriculum. Equality of opportunity meant 'meeting the needs of the individual child'. Liberal progressivism, at least in the rhetoric, emphasised the intrinsic value of education rather than its utilitarian or vocational value and the notion of a 'balanced' curriculum in which vocational and liberal education complemented each other. Educators sought to encourage the retention of girls, as all youth, in school, arguing that a good general (liberal) education was necessary for the production of the well-rounded citizen-worker (Education Reform Association 1945).

But, as Yeatman comments, this post-war view of the citizen-worker was a limited one which presupposed the citizenry to be a homogeneous racial, ethnic and lingual community. Indeed, the citizen was a man as head of the patriarchal nuclear family (Yeatman 1991, p. 12). Despite the postwar rhetoric of equality of opportunity and individual merit, for girls it meant equal but different. Girls continued to be 'prepared' for traditional female occupations (teaching, nursing) which, because they were 'women's work', were in turn largely defined as unskilled or less skilled (nursing), or, if done by women

working with men, paid less (teaching). Technical education continued to exclude girls, although it provided limited class mobility for some Anglo-Celtic working-class males (Pocock 1988). Meanwhile, working-class girls did not perceive any utilitarian value in a broad general education for citizenship and they were suspicious of the perceived vocational value of domestic science, preferring white-collar or even manual factory work to domestic service, as they had since 1900.

In commercial education, well into the 1960s girls continued to leave school with stenography, typing and basic office-management skills and generally no exit certificate. But now, with the bureaucratisation and Taylorisation of the larger service industries, instead of entering a small employer's office, placement was increasingly in larger firms directly into the mailing room or the typing pool. This increased routinisation and specialisation (and therefore deskilling of clerical work) meant few clerical workers now used their stenography skills. Stenography, earlier in the century, had meant an upgrading of a clerical worker's skills. With the expansion of commercial education, oversupply of stenographers meant no guarantee of a good position. Then, during the 1950s, stenography was used less because many young male managers lacked the expertise to dictate. Without career paths, many of the women who remained in office work were more highly experienced and carried out more diverse/complex tasks than the managers they supported (Blackmore 1987). Meanwhile, many young female employees actively sought out more satisfying jobs, usually in smaller firms, often shifting jobs two or three times until they obtained a 'good job' which provided them with greater diversity of experience and autonomy. This initial practice of job searching merely confirmed the view that young girls were 'unreliable' labour (Blackmore 1986). Meanwhile, schools continued to train girls in both stenography as well as typing well into the 1970s. Indeed, commercial educators were involved in a 30-year debate from the 1930s to 1960s as to which form of shorthand should be taught—Dacomb, which was more educationally and pedagogically suitable, or Pitman, which had greater vocational usefulness. It was as much the *perception* of what skills a 'good secretary' must possess as of directly measuring workplace skill requirements (Blackmore 1987), therefore supporting the view that there was no strong coupling between education and work, other than perhaps at the level of rhetoric (see Nelson-Rowe 1991).

Indeed, as Schilling observed, education may provide structures and programs and therefore opportunities which are seen to be responsive to the discourse of vocationalism. But the information that the students receive, which shapes their options and informs their choices, derives from interaction with different sets of people in many other settings (Schilling 1989). Policy makers

and educators can therefore inform but not control what individual students selectively choose to inform their 'choices'. But at the same time, such choices are constrained, as I have suggested, not only by gender, but also by external economic circumstances. Girls' retention rate in education only significantly increased, therefore, when employment in their traditional fields of work (clerical work) was shrinking, and not merely because schools offered vocational courses (Blackmore 1986).

Finally, post-war Keynesian economics also brought with it increased intrusion of the welfare state into all aspects of public and private life in ways which had contradictory implications for women. On the one hand, the development of the welfare state saw the shifting of women's dependence from individual men to the state, and even a deskilling of women with the emergence of a class of professional managers who claimed expertise in areas traditionally seen to be women's domain and expertise in child-care, education and health. But many educated professional women in the 'new middle class' benefited from such claims of expertise at a cost to working-class women (Yeatman 1990; Deacon 1985). On the other hand, during this same period, women as a group were statistically 'deskilled' through census reclassification, with the number of women defined as being 'skilled' reducing from 6% in 1911 to 0.9% in 1960, just as they had been statistically defined as 'dependants' with the 1897 census classification (Keeves & Read 1974, p. 15).

So, whilst there was an apparent strengthening of the links between school and work in the postwar period, as there were higher retention rates, full employment and an increased demand for skills, how such connections worked beneficially for girls is contentious. Girls entering clerical work did not need an educational certificate to be employed, but still acquired job-specific skills through state-funded schooling. Clerical work had gone through stages in which some female workers were upskilled and others not during the 1930s, and then a more general deskilling in the 1950s. Whilst in general boys who completed the same years of schooling in commercial education were expected to have a credential, a 'liberal' education and no job-specific skills, and entered well-developed career paths, in periods of shortage of labour supply in clerical work, and within specific localised labour markets (e.g. rural towns) educational certificates were not even required for boys' recruitment (Blackmore 1987). It is possible to conclude that, despite localised variations, the overall trend was the intensification of the segmentation of the Australian labour market based on gendered versions of skill.

### *Skilling for the national economy 1970s–1990s*

Despite expansion of the service sector and the collapse of agriculture and mining during the 1970s, the solution to Australia's economic crisis was seen to rest with developing a manufacturing and science infrastructure. Education was to assist by focusing on science, maths and applied technology and technical education, as previously, in the 1930s and 1900s, it was promoted as the main avenue for developing the skills base for the economic infrastructure. In 1974, the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges were established to meet directly the immediate training needs of industry. But the TAFE system was saturated with masculine bias and skill training was modelled on the male craftsman. Not only did apprenticeship continue to absorb its resources but the training, rather than educational emphasis, reflected the interest, experience and energy of its predominantly male staff. Women's access programs intended to act as bridging courses for women between generalist education and specialist technical courses were secondary to the legal commitment to apprenticeship monopolised by males (Pocock 1988, p. 18). As unemployment increased, the technical versus general education debate within the TAFE sector intensified and 'equity' (often equated with access to women) lost out to efficiency. Vocational relevance in the context of declining resources in the TAFE sector meant providing training which had immediate economic benefit (job-specific skills) which met workplace demand rather than more general prevocational education oriented towards interpersonal and life skills (women's access programs). And, as has been the pattern since 1900, women tended to pay for their vocational training in specialist skill areas such as hairdressing and clerical work whilst the federal government maintained high levels of funding for apprenticeships and in areas which were traditionally male fields (electronics and engineering).

Schools initially also responded to the growing youth unemployment after 1974 in traditional ways, largely because state schools and individual youth were again blamed for job shortages which were a consequence of global and structural factors. For example, there was concern to upgrade skill formation in new technology with the introduction of computers and word processing. Specific courses were developed for 'at risk' youth which were more vocationally relevant, e.g. word processing and corporate secretarial work (see also Gaskell 1986 for a Canadian example). Sandra Taylor argues that in fact in Australia this was training girls in job-specific skills at a time when the introduction of word processing was in fact reducing the demand for female school leavers with clerical skills by over a half during the period 1971–76 (Taylor 1986; Sweet 1980). Whilst the rationale for such business courses at



secondary and tertiary level was to impart job-specific vocational skills, the courses themselves, as in the past, were more concerned first, about the socialisation of the female students into 'good' secretarial practice which was premised on the acquisition of social and highly gendered constructs of femininity rather than technical skills and, second, a 'life skills' emphasis due to the high possibility of unemployment (Gaskell 1986; Claydon 1986). As in the past, the emphasis on social rather than cognitive or technical skills for 'at risk' students virtually guarantees their unemployability, although within this 'skilling' is couched as a means of promoting equity through improving at-risk youth's access to the market. Schools are not directly catering for labour-market demand, but as much meeting political pressure to address wider social issues of youth unemployment.

Likewise the first youth employment schemes of the Liberal Government focused on the mismatch between youth's skills and those required by the labour market resulting from the perceived failure of schools (Williams Report 1979, pp. 88-9). Again, youth policy initially relied heavily on the private business sector, voluntary organisations and community-based programs to create solutions for this youth crisis, e.g. Community Youth Support Scheme. At the same time major policy initiatives kept the responsibility for vocational training with the public educational sector, e.g. the Transition Education Program which encouraged 'at risk' youth to stay on at school. TEAC rejected narrow vocational training in favour of a more integrated studies curriculum designed to encourage the development of a wide set of skills broadly related to work and human relations (coping and survival skills) and 'self reliance'. Whilst this did produce many worthwhile curricular practices in schools it still individualised the youth problem by emphasising self-help and social skilling to increase 'juvenile productivity' (Dwyer *et al.* 1984).

So by the 1980s two competing educational ideologies existed—the vocational manpower perspective on transitional education exemplified in such community and non-school programs as CYSS, which focused on social and survival skills, and a 'liberal approach in which schools supplied general skills transferable to a range of circumstances (Kemmis *et al.* 1983, pp. 114-16). The latter direction was extended with the Labor Party's election to Federal Government between 1983 and 1987 and the Participation and Equity Program which sought to 'mainstream' educational reform and make the curriculum more inclusive and less academic, and hopefully, therefore, more attractive to more students. Whilst TEAC had been content-driven (teaching job skills to meet employer demands for 'school leaver with relevant skills'), PEP moved on to examine the concept of a common curriculum (Rizvi & Kemmis 1988, pp. 237-8).

Whilst there is a high level of continuity in how vocational education is seen to be the panacea for youth unemployment, and how 'vocational' for working-class youth and girls implies the imparting of social and attitudinal skills rather than technical or high-level cognitive skills, the 1980s witnessed significant changes in ways in which the discourse of vocationalism is framing educational policy (Seddon 1991). First, there has been a move away from the view that the state should fully fund education because the state benefits from the skilling of its citizens, towards a market philosophy which asserts that the individual also benefits from education and training and should contribute financially as well through a graduate tax in tertiary education (1989) and user-pay fees in TAFE (1991). This is a good indicator of the level to which economic rationalism became orthodoxy within a federal Labor Party which abolished university fees in 1972. Employers are also expected to fund some small part of the costs of upgrading skills with the industry training levy of 1%, although Australian industry has historically invested little in research and training. The hegemony of human capital view is also clearly evident in the various national reports on education, training and technology (Myer 1980; Dawkins 1988; Finn 1991) with their 'rejection of Keynesian economics' and 'reversion to classical political economics' (Freeland & Sharp 1984, pp. 215-16). Hence the emphasis on educational production functions (which presumes an input-output industrial model) and cost effectiveness as a means to measure educational output and reduce the wastage of human capital. Recent reports invoke the capacity of 'market forces' to allocate efficiently labour power and the distribution of educational opportunities for individuals. That is, the market will apportion rewards according to merit and therefore deliver equity, a claim now challenged with high white-collar unemployment. A second difference which emerged with the *Kirby Report on the Labour Market* in 1985 is the desire to minimise labour-market segmentation, as it impeded the creation of a 'flexible and highly skilled workforce' able to adapt quickly to the changing needs of a rapidly changing and more technologically sophisticated post-Fordist workplace. The gendered division of labour is now seen to be unprofitable and unproductive (and not just unfair). Women are now the 'wasted resource' to be encouraged to enter areas which suffer a skill shortage—science, engineering, technology and the trades (Blackmore & Kenway 1988; Kenway 1989).

Third, past dichotomies are disappearing from the discourse of vocationalism as they lose their power when confronted with the perceived needs of the post-Fordist worker. This is most obvious in the oft-repeated statement that the 'artificial distinction between "general" and "vocational" has long outlived its usefulness ... The Schools Commission does not see a "necessary conflict between general educational goals and vocationally useful

education" ... nor a necessary dichotomy between the needs of the individuals and the interests of the nation as a whole' (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1987, p. 3). Again, in 1991, the *Finn Review on Postcompulsory Education and Training* stated 'both individual and industry needs are leading towards a convergence of general and vocational education. There is an increasing realism internationally that the most successful forms of work organisation are those which encourage people to be multiskilled, creative and adaptable' (Finn 1991, p. ix). Both reports presume a more instrumental view of education directing education towards national economic priorities as we move into a post-Fordist society.

The post-Fordist worker, therefore, is expected to display flexibility and adaptability (Watkins 1990). Job continuity is no longer the norm. The language of skill now focuses on 'multi-skilling' and 'broadbanding': the transferability of 'generic' skills across a broad band of work situations. 'Multi-skilling' is seen to be distinct from job-specific training, the latter now relegated to specialist courses in TAFE. Skilling in this context has taken on an abstract quality. Whereas skills in the early and mid-20th century referred more narrowly to what were seen to be specific technical or manual competencies, skilling now also refers more broadly to social, affective and intellectual competencies as well, e.g. entrepreneurial and creative skills in the search for a 'clever country'. Field (1990, p. 1) in *Skilling Australia*, for example, defines skill formation as 'a holistic concept that includes "education"; "personal development"; "formal training"; "on the job learning" and "experimental learning". Likewise, education, as the means to acquiring the necessary skills, has also to become 'flexible' (Watkins 1991). For example, *In the National Interest* states: 'the object of education is the development of educated persons who have the breadth of knowledge, useful and readily refocused skills, a commitment to continue learning, and competencies which make them effective persons in the various facets of their social and working lives' (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1987, p. 8). These sentiments are echoed in the Finn Review.

The educational response in curriculum terms, as in *Strengthening Australia's Schools: A Consideration of the Focus and Content of Schooling* (Department of Employment, Education and Training 1989), has been to emphasise critical thinking, competencies and problem solving rather than content; what could be described as learning about learning. Knowledge, skills and capacities are therefore seen to be discrete. Indeed the language of skills of the 1980s implies that skilling itself is 'content-free'. Out of this, a new 'curriculum of employability' for the majority has emerged, defined by the Finn Review as a 'general vocational' education which is 'broad and balanced' with an 'appropriate mix of vocational and general education', 'theoretical and applied studies'. Learn-

ing is work, and work is learning in this new curriculum. Literacy and numeracy are now joined by computer literacy and communication skills as the key elements of vocational literacy. Specific subject fields (language and communication, mathematics, scientific and technological understanding, cultural understanding, problem solving, personal and interpersonal) are being broken down into 'key competencies'. This is a further shift in the direction started by the Australian Education Council's Hobart Statement on National Curriculum Objectives towards finding common definitions of work-related key competencies (skills) in specific fields of knowledge or learning areas so that they too can be assessed and compared across sites, across time and across individuals.

A number of dilemmas exist for educationalists here. First, in the past, I have suggested that the highly generalised 'language of skills' was problematic for educators because it lacked specific criteria for translating policy into practice. Skills can mean minimal literacy and numeracy, can refer to specific skills or more generic skills of comprehension and problem solving, skills in emotional management or high-level cognitive expertise, or can imply the capacity to increase ability in an area and gain mastery or excellence. There now appears to be a shift towards clarification of what is meant by skill. This creates new problems, given that the new competency-based approach to curriculum is both controlling of students and teachers, not only because it has a particularly narrow behaviourist view of pedagogy, but also because it can be linked to standardised assessment. Second, the introduction of problem solving includes the traditions of liberal progressivist educational thought with its focus on analysis, critical thinking, decision making and creative thinking but offers a new competency: 'skill transfer to new contexts'.

Third, the construction of skill is no less gendered in this new reading of the language of generic skills, despite the apparent inclusion of equity. Rather, it has assumed different nuances and produced new ironies. For example, women's work has traditionally been associated largely with the emotional management skills (caring and sharing) and therefore not seen to 'skill'. The notion of the multi-skilled manager in corporate management has effectively captured, without the same commitment, these emotional management, communication, interpersonal team-work skills in management and marketing (Yeatman 1990). This is most evident in the way in which the Finn Review perceives interpersonal and personal key competencies which include personal management and planning, negotiation and team skills, initiative and leadership, adaptability to change, self-esteem and ethics, all expectations of what may be required of the post-Fordist worker (or androgynous manager?) in the corporate state. And, as with previous appeals to vocational education, the Finn

Review links the skilling of Australia to disadvantage (rather than equity or discrimination). In seeking to promote mass secondary education until the age of 19, and in so doing raise the status of technical education, the Finn Review glibly slips across the essentially male-based power structure of TAFE, and the possibility of making it (and the traineeships) more accessible to women. Furthermore, the Mayer Committee (1992), which is expected to operationalise the specific meaning of 'work-related key competencies' has been belatedly asked to consider 'competencies relating to family and household management as a way of ensuring gender equity in employment opportunities' (Department of Employment, Education and Training 1992, p. 7). Thus shifts in the meaning of 'skill' signify changing social relationships within the labour process and between the public and private in ways which do not necessarily alter power relationships.

Indeed, I would suggest that, despite the theoretical shift from the notion of 'situation-specific' towards 'generic' skills, the current national agenda for skill formation and all its educational implications has not significantly altered the underlying positivist and common-sense view embedded in human capital theory that skill is a fixed and measurable attribute defined by the technical needs of the workplace. And this is clear in the way in which the social constructivist position assumed by feminists has been marginalised. Increasingly, skilled work has been more closely associated with mental and esoteric rather than the physical and everyday activities. The social constructionist position, one largely assumed by feminists working in this field, is that skill is a relational phenomenon which depends not only on the relation of one kind of task to another (e.g. mental/manual work) but the supply and demand for people to do these tasks (e.g. local labour market) and the capacity of the incumbents to exclude others (e.g. male jobs/female jobs) as well as the material and technical aspects of work. Feminist theories of skill perhaps point to the need to consider different ways of judging skill—ones which value different types of skills, which are less individualised and more experientially based (Wajcman 1991).

So why has the skilling thesis of human capital theory become part of Labor orthodoxy? My argument suggests that it can be attributed partly to the poor database on skill classifications and how skills are linked to education, as well as to the lack of comprehensive research on the labour market in Australia. But there are other factors which must be considered. First, the focus on skills has much to do with the maintenance of particular gendered power relations in the workplace. Whilst there has been some sensitivity to the notion of skill as a social construct, it has been marginalised as a women's issue, because to view skill as other than an objective criteria for job evaluation is to undermine the

position, historically developed, of male unionists in the skilled trades. In current award restructuring there is only token acknowledgment of the social constructionist approach to skill which tries to understand the conditions under which some occupations are marked as more skilled than others when trying to comprehend the anomaly of women (Attewell 1990). Because the male craft worker is still the benchmark for skill definition in award restructuring, it is in the interests of negotiators not to do otherwise: the trade unions who cannot negate past notions of skill which have been historically constructed to favour male skilled trades; the business groups who seek to reduce costs through redefinitions of skill and have always benefited from women's lower pay rate; and the male managers who seek to maintain the status of mental over manual skill and be sure that skill is measured by how many you have authority over and how much money you manage rather than degree of autonomy or actual cognitive activity. No wonder women's interests in this process have largely been perceived as particularistic and marginal. Second, there is relative empirical ignorance of the complexity of factors which influence the individual's educational and occupational decisions and how these are impacted by gender, race and class. Third, the lack of criticism indicates the power of the hegemonic discourse of vocationalism in a period of economic uncertainty, about how schools should better serve the economy, and how this ideology has assumed a commonsense view of the school-work nexus which is ahistorical, inaccurate and deterministic.

## The language of skills and its educational implications

What are the educational consequences of the uncritical acceptance of the language of skills in education? First, the language of skills conflates the acquisition of menial, trivial and routinised tasks by subdividing and labelling, thereby converting 'tasks' into 'skills'. In so doing, such tasks become 'meaningful and productive work' (Jonathon 1991). In Australia, the conflation of skill in the educational discourse is evident with the introduction of work education as a cross-curriculum activity in many states. Now mental, manual and social skills acquired in classrooms can be related in all courses to future work. Study skills are now defined as productive work, such valuable intellectual skills being construed to lead to more creative and flexible workers.

Second, by using the 'language of skills' as a justification for education, training *and* skilling, it 'rationalises' the connection of welfare payments to what appears to be the acquisition of skills which are supposedly beneficial to both the individual and the community. In this way, it is generally the working-class

student who is forced to undergo 'upskilling' in menial work or acquisition of 'life' or social skills rather than technical or cognitive skills in order to receive welfare benefits through such programs, which means the recipients of such 'skilling' will remain 'outsiders' in terms of the mainstream skill formation.<sup>1</sup>

Third, there is increasingly a skills-based approach to curriculum formation away from a curriculum based on teacher-pupil interaction according to needs towards a mechanistic, standardising approach. The new Victorian Certificate of Education finalised in 1992 emphasises a broad range of problem-solving skills or learning about learning. The generalist liberal curriculum (as opposed to the classical liberal curriculum) has been 'vocalised' in that it is seen to provide each individual with a set of skills which will supposedly broaden their post-school options in an idealised conception of the nature of skills, of work and the operation of the labour market: that is, the multi-skilled student. I have suggested that the competency-based approach to learning being taken up by the Finn Review, a report written by non-educationalists, despite its claim to produce the post-Fordist worker, assumes essentially a behaviourist (if not Taylorist) approach to pedagogy, in which curriculum is treated as a technology, the teacher as a facilitator in transmitting an agreed package of competencies; in which competencies are concrete and measurable products of a linear learning process transferable to the workplace (Brown 1991). In so doing, it still adheres to the craft-based view of skill of the late 19th century. Unfortunately, in the search for key competencies within a national curriculum and assessment framework, competencies which are testable and comparable, whichever view of skill dominates has critical implications for curriculum and assessment, and therefore for pedagogy.

Fourth, it is the state system of education which has been blamed for education's failure to prepare youth with the necessary vocational skills given that the public education system has historically been expected to 'warehouse' potentially disruptive youth, thus allowing the private system its uninterrupted monopoly of the liberal-academic curriculum. Thus the 'language of skills' is ideologically powerful to conservative governments seeking to further privatise education at the cost of residualising state education.

Finally, new dilemmas arise out of the discourse of vocationalism and the skilling debate for women and girls in the current educational context. The skilling thesis has been closely linked to arguments for greater equality of opportunity. Historically, girls and women have benefited from state interventionism, e.g. Equal Opportunity Policy and the funding of vocational initiatives. As I have already illustrated, working-class girls have been funded by the state whilst acquiring job-specific training in stenography and typing in the period after 1945 until the 1970s when such skills became redundant. This has pro-

moted the social mobility of many working-class girls into white-collar jobs, in relatively more pleasant work environments than factories. At the same time, these gender-specific vocational skills slotted them effectively into female-type jobs (e.g. secretarial). In this way, the vocationalisation of schooling reinforced rather than challenged the gender relations of the workplace, whilst allowing limited social mobility for a few. Likewise, youth traineeships in the 1980s (a watered-down version of apprenticeship), which specifically targeted girls to broaden their skill base, succeeded primarily only in the public sector whereas the private sector failed to respond. So, in one sense, women continue to benefit from state intervention.

But the state is also determining the direction and therefore redefinition of equity. Current national policy initiatives (*Higher Education: A Policy Statement* [Dawkins 1980] and the *National Policy on the Education of Girls*) also favour an unsegmented and free labour market, undifferentiated by sex in which the multi-skilled individual can move within broad bands of related occupations, acquiring new skills and updating old, with a particular focus on non-traditional fields (science, maths and technology). These vocational arguments are fired by a particularly narrow view of equality and an ill-informed notion of how the labour market works and so may be a disservice in the long run to most women's and girls' interests. Such policies continue to ignore the relationship between the public domain of paid work and the 'private' aspect of individual lives. Instead, women are being 'repackaged' for the service of the market (Weiner 1988). It is incorrectly assumed, for example, that the skills held by women will receive the same economic and social rewards in the labour market. The notion of equity, is also redefined, linking it to individual choice in a free market rather than to the group disadvantage constructed through a gendering process embedded in the interactions between the labour market, the labour process, education and the family. The needs of the individual are also redefined narrowly in terms of skill and not more broad human attributes.

Furthermore, the emphasis on women gaining access to the science and technology labour market privileges, even if by default, cognitive and technical skills over social and affective skills, which are the 'traditional' skills associated with women's work (Kenway 1989). And where social skills are valued, as with the 'multi-skilled manager', they are encouraged merely for their instrumental value in increasing productivity and not for their intrinsic human value (Yeatman 1990). Whilst women may no longer be destined only for motherhood and family, their 'feminine qualities' (caring, interpersonal relations, communication) have now been 'co-opted' for managerialist ends. Because of other complexities, it has, therefore, become increasingly difficult at a practical level to distinguish between 'liberal/progressive ideas concerning the freedom for



girls and women to move upwards in educational and occupational hierarchies and "liberal"/laissez-faire ideas about labour market freedom, "the myth perpetrated by the New Right" (Seddon 1991).

In conclusion, at a macro level, other contradictions follow if the technological progressivist 'skilling thesis' is taken to its logical conclusion in an uncritical manner. The introduction of technology as a social good leads to temporary employment dislocation which demands constant reskilling and retraining. Consequently, there is a continual 'drain' on public expenditure acquired by the state through taxes on capital accumulation, which in turn reduces profitability and restricts capital accumulation (Freeland & Sharp 1984). This puts pressure on Labor governments to privatise and individualise skill acquisition. Furthermore, if education systems were more effective in producing the well-educated students as the upskilling thesis implies and in reducing the sexual inequalities of the labour market, the result would be socially critical employees (half of them women) who would be more disruptive and demanding in terms of conditions of employment, a trend which would be detrimental to capital's and/or male control over the workplace. But such contradictions are generally submerged through the persuasive power of the hegemonic discourse of vocationalism and the language of skills.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The raising of the unemployment benefit minimum age to 18 years in Australia in 1989 and maintaining the benefit at a lower level than Austudy has forced many students who would previously have left to stay on in school.

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## SECTION 2

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# WHAT'S IN A WORD: RECOGNITION OF WOMEN'S SKILLS IN WORKPLACE CHANGE

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CATE POYNTON AND KIM LAZENBY

## Background and aims

As part of its work program examining workplace change and the implications for women workers, the Women's Adviser's Unit of the Department of Labour in South Australia conducted a series of consultation sessions with women in industry and unions. During these consultations, the issue of the recognition of women's skills repeatedly arose as an area of particular concern. So far, the pattern of workplace change activities has been a predictable one, with most attention focused upon the industries, occupations and jobs traditionally undertaken by male workers and the skills possessed by these workers.

In a number of significant ways, the objectives and processes of workplace change activities in male-dominated industries are inappropriate to the industries and occupations in which women are highly represented and to the skills that women workers possess. As a result of the continuing emphasis on male-dominated occupations and industries, the potential for workplace change to advantage women workers has not yet begun to be realised. Indeed, as workplace change progresses the potential for these processes to disadvantage women workers (as opposed to having a neutral effect) becomes more real.

The women with whom we consulted highlighted their need for more powerful ways to describe the skills possessed by their women constituents as a prerequisite to gaining adequate recognition of these skills. For example, women working in the reception areas of 'high powered' multinational corpo-

rations report being *required* to be immaculately groomed, to behave with charm and poise and 'smile a lot'. But how can these job requirements be presented to the Industrial Commission, for example, in a serious and effective way?

This project attempts to address the need for more powerful ways of *describing* women's skills in order to provide industrial practitioners with some of the tools they require to argue more effectively for the *recognition* of these skills in established industrial forums. The specific aim of the project is to investigate and analyse the ways in which the skills of women workers are currently defined, with a particular but not exclusive emphasis on interpersonal and communication skills. The research was undertaken with a view to informing the development of more powerful and effective ways of describing the skills of women workers and alternative skill definitions have also been developed.

The project focuses on the skills of women working in clerical occupations. This occupation was chosen for a variety of reasons including the predominance of female workers in this occupation, the importance of this sector as an employer of women (as at February 1991 in South Australia, 78.4% of clerks were women and 28% of employed women were employed as clerks, ABS Labour Force Series) and the development of new classification structures for clerical workers in South Australia and Victoria.

In order to investigate the skills of women workers the following steps were undertaken:

- consultations with women workers in small group forums in order to obtain from them a clear indication of how they describe their skills and the difficulties they have in doing so, for example during skills, audit interviews, whilst completing written job descriptions for job evaluation activities, when applying for a job etc.

We conducted small group interviews which were interactive in nature both between group members and between the interviewers and interviewees. In contrast with some other projects of a similar nature which have had considerable difficulty in encouraging women workers to claim their skills, we were able to gather an enormous amount of material with relative ease. This experience clearly demonstrates that an understanding of the social construction of skill is an essential selection criteria for anyone conducting skills audits and other activities associated with workplace change. All too often it is assumed that language is 'transparent', that it is a clear window pane through which we can easily see and identify the skills of women

workers. In fact, as any expert consultant should be aware, the reverse is true. The language used to describe women's skills reflects the biases, misconceptions and inaccuracies which society holds about the value of women's work and their place in the workplace and the world. As such, language itself functions to obscure a true picture of women's skills. It is not enough, therefore, simply to ask women workers 'what are your skills?' and to take the answer at 'face value'. Nor indeed, does such deficient and inexpert research justify the large fees charged by some consultants in this area.

- consultation with union officers and private sector human resource management personnel to obtain written source material where it exists, for example job descriptions, skills audit and analysis questionnaires, training materials etc;
- linguistic and other analysis of the verbal and written material to identify features which disadvantage women workers.

## Outcomes

One of the most overwhelming features of the interviews we conducted was the way in which women we interviewed described their skills as personal attributes or qualities. They did this in various ways:

- in a general manner, for example 'you have to have the right personality for the job', 'you have to like people' etc;
- in terms of 'being' or 'having to be', for example 'you have to be patient and accessible', 'you have to be especially nice' or 'courteous', 'pleasant', 'adaptable' etc; and
- in terms of attributes you 'have to have', for example 'broad shoulders', 'commonsense', 'a sense of humour'.

Jenson refers to this process of devaluing women's skills when she discusses the *politics of skills and talents*. She states:

Very frequently, the work which women perform is classified as non-skilled because it is considered too 'natural' and/or 'merely dextrous' ... it reflects the supposed *talents* of women rather than any acquired skill for which recognition in the form of wages or social value is appropriate. (Jenson 1989, p. 151, emphasis added)

Other issues highlighted by the research include:

- use of broad, general terms which obscure the specific and highly sophisticated skills being exercised by women workers;
- ways in which the *responsibility* inherent in many women's jobs is undervalued or 'distilled' (Jackson, p. 23) out of these jobs and assigned to others; and
- lack of recognition of the technical, enterprise and industry *knowledge* possessed by women workers and the way in which the reliance on informal training relates to this lack of recognition.

All of these points are discussed more fully in the final report of the project entitled *What's in a Word: Recognition of Women's Skills in Workplace Change*. Alternative skill descriptions are available in the form of a wallchart aimed at women workers and a practical guide developed for human resource and industrial relations practitioners. Copies of these publications and further details about the 'What's in a Word' project can be obtained from the Women's Adviser's Unit of the South Australian Department of Labour.

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# FROM INDUSTRY TO ENTERPRISE: ISSUES FOR WOMEN WORKERS AROUND AWARD AND INDUSTRY RESTRUCTURING

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KIM WINDSOR

I will start with an overview of some of the problems we confront when we are looking at women's industries and jobs and the impact of these on award and industry restructuring. From there I will talk in greater detail about what is going on at the enterprise level and some of the mechanisms that we might need to think about to influence employment issues in the workplace. Effecting real employment outcomes demands that we come to grips with the practical implications of restructuring in workplaces. Most of the examples I will use come from the manufacturing sector. Obviously much more work needs to be done in the service industries, but manufacturing is the area in which I have done most enterprise-level work. Some of the detail on the clothing industry comes from work both in Australia and overseas.

## Background

The starting point for what I want to talk about is a problem we are more than familiar with—that women's skills are often unrecognised and unrewarded. They may upskill, they may learn extra things but they rarely get paid for it, they rarely get acknowledged for it and in the old award systems, they usually did not have a classification structure that takes these skills into account. That is where we are starting from and it is not hard to find examples. Women in banks often complain about training young boys who then quickly go up the ladder

past them. In offices the boss openly admits 'Oh my secretary runs this business', great—but she is not paid for it. In the electronics industry which is an industry I looked at in some detail, women were learning a whole range of semi-trade jobs. At that stage the male employees and the union were quite happy for the women to learn some processes. These were those very boring bits that skilled tradesworkers really did not want to hold onto. What they certainly did not want to address were any questions about reclassifying or paying. That would mean acknowledging that women were picking up skills that could challenge the relativities that distinguished trades person, from the process worker and in this case—men from women.

Failure to recognise skills properly is one problem. The other one is that some women are not given opportunities to pick up additional skills. Some women in the food industry, to take one example, peel onions all day, or in the sewing industry, clothing industry sew buttons all day. Jobs like these are by nature very repetitive. So there are two scenarios: one is that women get additional skills and do not get paid for it, and the other is that in some jobs the design of the job itself is totally preventing women from expanding their skills.

Before looking at the impact of industry and award restructuring on these scenarios I want to consider briefly the kinds of industries and jobs that women are concentrated in. The industries themselves are generally not very profitable, they are often characterised by a low level of investment. As a result their technology is often at best basic, and they are typically highly protected industries. The clothing industry is a striking case in point. In summary they are the industries that are most vulnerable to the globalisation of industries and markets. The scenario of steadily reducing levels of protection and the requirement to be world competitive will hit these industries the hardest and of course they are the least able to make the change. So when we are talking about doing something positive for women in the context of restructuring, we have to understand that we are dealing with industries that are 'behind the eight ball' in terms of their very survival.

Indeed there are some who would argue these industries are not worth holding onto—that they are by nature a low-skilled, labour-intensive industry that more properly belongs in a low-wage country. Although that certainly describes current work process I believe this is not inevitable. Abandoning an industry like clothing and the people it employs might be the easy way out but the real challenge is to restructure these industries to target competitive market niches and work processes. This requires an understanding of the existing approach to work organisation and the pressures facing it.

## The clothing industry

The work processes in clothing still rely on low skill, repetition, low level of autonomy, highly supervised, extremely boring, totally non-participative work. In the worst cases it comes close to the nineteenth-century Dickensian. This kind of work process is not just a problem for the people who work in it. It is increasingly a problem that threatens the viability of any business employing these processes. At the core of the problem is inertia. Talk of industries growing lazy behind protective tariff walls is graphically borne out by a work process with little change since last century. While it is true that some advancements have been made in speed and accuracy of technology, thinking about the application of our human resources has trailed a long way behind. With the prospect of increasingly internationalised labour and trade markets there is little incentive to continue production in a relatively high wage environment. Clothing workers are already among the lowest paid. If skill requirements are kept to a minimum and no advantage is taken of location, the logical next step is to close up shop and either import or set up off-shore.

This is the logic that has seen many factories once employing large numbers of people now operating as warehouses for imported goods. The alternative requires more than lurching at the obvious. It means looking at what advantages you have and building on them. If we try to compete on the basis of low-cost, standardised products we are fighting a losing battle. To maintain and hopefully improve wages and conditions means identifying market niches that respond to more than just price. Some of the latest management buzz terms like Just-In-Time (JIT), Total Quality Management (TQM) and Quick Response refer to approaches that target high quality and responsiveness to local markets as the basis of a competitive business. In the clothing industry it looks something like this.

Marks and Spencers is a big clothing chain in the UK. They used to place large orders—say for instance a thousand blue shirts. Now what they say is 'We know we need a thousand shirts, but we're not sure exactly what colour or design will sell. We will use our electronic point of sale terminals to monitor what the market is buying and every week we'll let you know whether it's blue shirts, or green, or whether we'd like the collar button down or not'. Any firm which wants to continue to supply Marks and Spencers has to have the capacity to respond. If you have got a system that delivers a thousand bits of shirts, which eventually come into being a whole shirt once you have got it through the process, you are stuck. When the manufacturer rings and says, 'I need green shirts this week' and you have got all these half-sewn blue shirts somewhere

halfway through the production process you are hardly well placed to deliver on time. So the old production system cannot respond to what the market is now expecting. You could try guessing what colour will sell and holding the stock in your warehouse. This loads you up with an enormous cost of holding that inventory rather than selling it. You pay for the fabric, you pay for the labour to make it and you are likely then to foot the bill for warehousing since you still have no guarantee of a sale. This is where the pressure is coming from. Any manufacturer who continues to use a mass production system will come under enormous financial strain. Some will go under, and hopefully some will reassess and redesign their production systems.

Survival depends less on making it cheap than on making it right. If the market wants red shirts this week instead of green ones, there is not much point in being able to produce cheap green ones. Companies need to look at how they can benefit from, rather than be penalised for, their location. If you can respond quickly to market demand, supply goods that are correctly sized and labelled and an acceptable standard of quality then you are offering significant benefits over low cost imports. However, making the transition from mass production to quick response is not easy. It means challenging the whole approach to production, preconceptions about productive performance and most importantly for us here today—the way work is valued and workers are treated.

## Industry restructuring

Faced with this challenge, many companies will not stay the distance. At bargain basement prices the off-shore production or import option will be difficult to pass over if you ignore what the market wants and focus on garment cost. One alternative for companies remaining in Australia is by no means peculiar to the clothing industry. It relies on automating as much of the process as possible to remove the more troublesome factor of production—labour. In fact automating sewing of clothes has proved extremely difficult. Both the Americans and Japanese set about the task and in both cases after years of research and some small progress, abandoned the exercise concluding that while it would be possible to robotise aspects of the process, the costs would be so prohibitive that it would not have wider industry application. Not perturbed by this experience it is difficult for a manager who was probably once a production engineer to resist reacting to problems with a technology fix. This is probably to be expected. These people are comfortable with machines. They know how they work and what they can do. Compared to people, they are a breeze. The only problem is that they are a false hope for competitive advan-



tage. An international market means the innovative piece of technology you have today will be available to local and off-shore competitors tomorrow. The other problem is that at best the process can be semi-automated. It will still require people and that could be a tall order.

One company overseas was genuinely perplexed at the response of workers to their initiatives. The production manager explained: 'I just can't understand it, I can't get people to come and work at my factory. I've introduced all of this highly automated equipment. It's so simple, anyone can work it—anyone can come into this factory and do this job and they still don't want to come here'. His ideas of what makes an attractive job was fairly limited. It was interesting to see in companies that were really pursuing the high level technology, but very deskilled work process, the majority of workers were older and middle-aged women. It was virtually impossible to get school leavers to go and work in places like that, which raises a longer term problem—where will future workers come from.

The third option is to do something about involving people differently in the work process and even if you get that far, even if a company understands that that is the direction in which it ought to be heading, there is still a long way to go before doing something to improve employment opportunities for women. A big temptation for many managers is to abandon the mess they have created—and their employees—in favour of setting up a 'green fields' site—that is a new, clean site where you can start again. A green field's site might be all right except that the same managers go and set it up, so sure—you can get rid of the workers but you have still got those managers who set up the old system. If we want to do something for the women who are currently employed in pretty awful jobs, the first challenge is to resist this tendency to say 'Oh well let's just abandon it and start again'.

## Award restructuring

The starting point is to understand the dimensions of award restructuring at an industry-level which provides the framework for enterprise level initiatives. In some and hopefully most industries the restructuring of awards presents a significant challenge to gender bias. In awards covering people like clothing workers and clerks, there has been a new recognition of skills. In the clothing industry for example, the cutters (the trade equivalent) sat so many rungs above the sewing people. Sewing operators were generally covered by one rate. The award now provides four levels for sewing operators taking them to the same level as a cutter at the upper end. This recognises that there are significant skill

differences between someone who sews buttons on and someone who sews an entire garment—a man's suit for example—it is no longer acceptable simply to pass the job off as a semiskilled operator. Winning recognition for skills is a first and very important step. The second objective of award restructuring is to develop career paths. While the award can provide a career framework—turning that into a practical career path depends on restructuring the work process. If there is no job redesign and no training to link the different levels of the award the career options will not exist.

In this new skill-based award environment, the issue of training becomes an industrial as well as an equity issue. The question of who gets trained and in what can no longer be the preserve of the supervisor or the manager. Two critical issues for all workers and particularly women in terms of further career advancement are: is the workplace designed in a way that gives you career opportunities?; and secondly, who gets them? Who gets the prerequisite training that gives you access to these. These questions will be decided at the enterprise level. So what are the mechanisms for influencing these decisions? Most of the restructured awards provide for a consultative committee to be set up. These committees have the potential to play a key role in shaping the agenda for job redesign and designing a training plan to deliver skill requirements both for today and in the future. This will only happen if committees and particularly workplace representatives, are properly trained and resourced to tackle these issues. A woman who spends most of her time behind a sewing machine will not find it easy to sit around a table with management to discuss production problems and targets.

It will be easy for employers to abuse this or take advantage of workers new to these arrangements. There are numerous instances of employers listing basic protected rights such as sick and annual leave on consultative committee agendas even though there is an industrial agreement to protect these entitlements. But some employers are starting to understand that their employees really do have a contribution to make—they understand the business—what happens on the shop floor, and why it works well or does not work at all, in a way that no-one else around the board table does. Tapping this knowledge and mobilising the workforce to help develop, support and implement management strategy rather than supervising and managing their compliance can give a company a competitive advantage that will be impossible for competitors to duplicate easily. It is those companies and those managers who can begin to grasp this potential of what the future could look like.

## Challenges for the workforce

Once we establish joint management/union/shop floor consultative committees as a vehicle for workplace change there are some key factors that will influence their responsiveness to issues affecting women. The first of these is the question of representation. It might be all right for people like ourselves to be across issues of gender bias, but go onto a shop floor and most people just look at you as if you are mad, if you start talking about equity. They might be good unionists but whether they are men or women they are unlikely to relate to concerns over gender-based discrimination. I was in a factory the other day and they had just elected representatives onto the consultative committee. We briefed people about the need to have a committee representative of the workforce including both men and women, about making sure casuals are covered as well as full-time, different ethnic groups and so on. In one area 80% of the workforce are women and they elected two men. So while it might be taken for granted in public sector and some professional workplaces that there should be at least equal representation, there is not that kind of understanding in most manufacturing workplaces.

Complicating the issue of representation is this split in most production environments between the maintenance unions who are generally well-organised, well-trained and male and the production unions where most women are found. Not surprisingly those workers who have had more union training and who have more industrial strength tend to dominate. In some cases the maintenance unions have a 50% share of the consultative committee membership despite usually having between 5% and 15% workforce coverage. Irrespective of their numbers, they will dominate on issues—partly because these are much clearer for males in the workforce. They are about things like demarcation, about which type of accredited training courses they should have access to. These are familiar industrial matters that are relatively easy to grasp. When you are talking about women's skills it is much more incremental. Women may not be crossing over a demarcation boundary but in many workplaces their jobs are demanding increasing levels of skill that can easily go undocumented and unrewarded. Most companies going down the quality path require that process workers now take responsibility for their own quality. This can involve keeping statistical records, negotiating with others in the work process to identify and solve problems, or making decisions about whether to stop production, yet these skills may not be properly acknowledged. Defining training issues presents as much of a problem. It is easy to agree that training should be accessible to all workers and of course we would insist on accredited training

rather than informal instruction that does not add to a career path. The problem is that training for people below trade level has not been a priority for education institutions by and large. It is still the case that beyond hobby courses, very little structured, accredited training exists for people below trade level. So you have women going off and doing word processing courses run by the software sales people. Process workers who get a quick on-the-job explanation of a new piece of equipment. None of it is presently linked into an accredited training framework. When you are looking at influencing training decisions to support skill development in areas dominated by women it is more than an argument about training access. First you have to identify or develop the training—next you need to ensure it is recognised for the purposes of further training and career progression. In areas of skill development and trade level and above, these issues have already been addressed.

To summarise some priorities coming out of these observations, the first is to develop a view of work at an organisational level. Employers might level criticisms at demarcations as creating inefficiencies. A much more serious danger is that it divides the workforce. It has created an industrial climate where some workers have achieved pay and status in recognition of their skills while others have either been prevented from acquiring skills or if they did—they went unrecognised and unrewarded. It is often the case that the process unions where women are concentrated are not as industrially powerful as the maintenance unions. Rather than seeing the weaker union as a liability in negotiations the consultative committee provides a forum for all sections of the workforce to gain more of an overview to represent the interests of the total workforce. This throws out a challenge to the traditional role of the shop steward. Traditionally the role of shop stewards is to represent the rights and interests of their members. And if they make up only 5% or 10% of the workforce and are strategically placed they will probably do very well and will not be concerned about the remaining 90%—traditionally that is not their concern. In the new workplace it will be.

## Challenges for management

I have spent some time talking about challenges for the workforce, I want to turn now to management. Managers need to understand more about what constitutes 'competitive performance'. What do competitive workplaces look like? How do you mobilise people to work towards common goals? How do you convince people that this is more than another management fad? Involvement of people is a two-way process that you cannot control. It is a process that must

be premised on mutual benefit. It requires a level of at least respect if not trust for the other party. To work properly both players will need access to resources to develop their own position. If making the break with mass production demands a big leap, understanding and respecting—even resourcing workers to investigate and form their own independent views—requires an even bigger step. One clothing company in the United Kingdom had the theory right but still held to a 'benevolent fairly' patronising view of 'their girls'. Despite their best efforts the workforce had never taken a great deal of interest in the new approach. The most enthusiastic they got was 'Oh yeah I guess it's a bit better than the old way, I suppose but it's really just another management system'. Now if that is the level of interest and involvement that you get, you are not going to get benefits out of this sort of approach anyway. A different approach had been developed by some metal plants in Italy. There the Italian metals union was providing the research and backup to enterprise-level consultative processes. Rather than seeing consultative committees as a thin end of the wedge to getting rid of industry-wide unions, this example demonstrates the highly constructive and central role of an organised labour union committed to maintaining and improving their industry. More enlightened managers are recognising that unions are integral. As long as workers do not have an opportunity really to evaluate and work out their position they are also going to have no investment in making the outcomes work. The key is to enlighten managers not only about what they ought to be doing to stay in business, but also about *how* they need to go about it. The line that 'My door is always open, they could have always come and talked to me', is just not good enough if we are talking about effective involvement.

## Summary

Finally I welcome this opportunity to focus on some of the enterprise-level detail. I am not underestimating the importance of intervening to shape industry-wide industrial and training frameworks; however, this work is already well advanced. Much more needs to be done on the training front in terms of recognising prior learning and developing accredited training modules relevant to work areas where women are concentrated. But to take advantage of the potential opened up in the process of industry restructuring requires that we get down to the level of the shop floor. How does it work, how can both company performance and jobs be improved and what can we do to ensure that women benefit from the changes? I believe these are the critical issues for anyone interested in women's employment over the coming years.

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# WOMEN AND SKILL FORMATION

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ANN BYRNE

In this discussion, I will focus on skill identification. Before I begin, it is useful to remind ourselves of the actual situation of women in the paid economy. In 1990 the Labour Research Centre Inc. completed a report for the National Women's Consultative Committee—*Pay Equity for Women in Australia*. The findings of the report show that women earn less than men in:

- all major categories of earnings (minimum award, ordinary time and total);
- all components of earnings (ordinary, overtime, overaward payments, payment by results);
- all industries;
- all major occupational groupings and all minor occupational groupings (except enrolled nurse, registered nurse, and TAFE teachers);
- the majority of benefit categories (by occupation and industry); and
- allowances.

The report also developed a model of pay inequity which shows a hierarchy of reason for pay inequity.

An astounding feature of our findings was that women do not receive the same pay as men even if they perform the same work as men. Women and men receive the same base rate but our research suggests an inequity in the payment of overawards and allowances. The report clearly shows that the problems and barriers to pay equity vary from industry to industry—and that blanket approaches are good to develop a framework but do not necessarily lead to change.

### A model of pay equity, August 1989

Nature of income	Reasons for pay inequity	Pay equity rate
<b>MAE Level 1</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Women are in low-paid occupations and are covered by low-paid awards.</li> <li>2 Women have inadequate or no access to appropriate award allowances.</li> <li>3 Women have fewer opportunities to work shifts and receive appropriate award penalty rates.</li> <li>4 Women's access to over-award payments in the form of award supplementary payments is severely restricted.</li> </ol>	93%
<b>AWOTE Level 2</b>	<p>1-4 above plus:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5 Women face discrimination in the labour market with regard to over-award payments, e.g. a female shop assistant or metal process workers does not receive the same over-award payments as a male.</li> </ol>	83%
<b>AWTE(1) Level 3</b>	<p>1-5 above plus:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6 Women have fewer opportunities to work overtime and receive the appropriate award and over-award payments</li> <li>7 Women have fewer opportunities for promotion to better paid jobs because of either direct discrimination, an absence of training, or less on-the-job experience.</li> </ol>	78%
<b>AWTE(2) Level 4</b>	<p>1-7 above plus:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8 Women have fewer opportunities to work full-time because of the absence of suitable and affordable child care.</li> </ol>	65%

MAE: minimum award earnings

AWOTE: average weekly ordinary time earnings for full-time non-managerial employees

AWTE(1): average weekly total earnings for full-time employees

AWTE(2): average weekly total earnings for all employees.

The findings of the report *Pay Equity for Women in Australia* show there is no one cause for pay inequity. Rather the earnings gap results from a range of factors and barriers including:

- Structural barriers such as occupational and industrial segregation (that women and men work in different occupations and industries). It is interesting to note that occupational segregation is actually increasing. We know that the occupations and industries where women predominate are characterised by low status and low pay.
- Institutional barriers like: the higher incidence of part-time and casual work amongst women; women's lesser access to training and promotion; the lower availability of and access to shift work and overtime by women; and current work and job design.
- Discrimination, for example: women's limited access to overaward payments (women earn less than half the overaward payments of men); the lack of recognition and undervaluation of women's skills and work; and the absence of adequate and affordable child-care.

The report clearly shows that the problems and barriers to pay equity vary from industry to industry. The problems facing teachers are different from the problems facing shop assistants. For example, in the community services industry the major barrier to achieving pay equity is a *lack of recognition and undervaluation of women's skills* (largely the result of the view that it is women's work). Management scoff and laugh when patience, stamina, flexibility and empathy are mentioned as important skills for home support workers, forgetting that these skills are highly paid for in managers and top executives. In the metal industry one major problem in achieving pay equity is the *occupational segregation* of women. Most of the women in the industry are process workers and there are very few career opportunities for process workers. There is also a problem of *skill recognition* in the metal industry. Lifting heavy weights has long been acknowledged as an important skill (and attracts a special allowance). But, being dexterous, nimble or concentrating for long periods—skills women process workers in the electronics industry utilise every day, do not attract additional payment. In fact, these skills are totally unrecognised and undervalued. Why? Because they are seen as inherently female qualities and more to do with the size of the fingers than skill.

Another important barrier to pay equity in the metal industry is the *differential overaward payments*. A female process worker can expect to earn about \$21.30 in overaward payments per week, compared to \$42.10 for a male process worker and \$76.50 for a fitter (1989 figures).

By contrast, in the hospitality industry the *high incidence of part-time and*



*casual work* is a major barrier to pay equity. *Gender segmentation* is also a problem with women concentrated in the low-paid, low-status occupations of waiters, house attendants and kitchen hands, while men are generally cooks, senior waiters or managers. In the textile, clothing and footwear industry work organisation is a major barrier to pay equity, with work divided into very narrow tasks (which are repetitive and boring). This type of work organisation offers very few career opportunities and little chance of training. For clerks *skill recognition and valuation* is a major problem. Another is the differing *overaward payments*. ABS statistics show that a male data processor's average weekly ordinary time earnings are \$492. While a female data processor can expect to earn only \$380.90—a difference of \$111.10 or a pay equity rate of 77.4%.

Other problems like the lack of adequate and affordable child-care, inflexible work arrangements and hours, and access to training are common across all industries. The report recommends an industry approach to: identify specific barriers to pay equity in the industry; develop a package of strategies to overcome the equity; and formulate an industry implementation plan. The identification and valuation of skill is one part of developing pay equity for women.

## What is skill?

There are many general definitions, for example:

The capacity to access and combine ability and knowledge in order to perform a task safely and competently.

The 'how' if you like. Many skills are required to perform a single task. To perform the task 'preparing, cooking and plating food', for example, a cook would need to have the following skills:

- ability to operate all relevant equipment;
- knowledge of portion sizes and presentation standards;
- a knowledge of cooking techniques and weights and measures;
- judgment and decision making;
- problem-solving skills; and
- the ability to organise work.

The capacity to perform a task requires not only skill, but knowledge and in many cases specific personal attributes like stamina, good grooming and self-

motivation. It is important to know that there are different types of skills. Skills can be categorised into technical skills, interpersonal skills and organisation skills.

- **Technical skills**

This is the ability to perform the required task. Technical skill describes the process of doing the job. Word processor operators type documents. Typing is the process by which they do their job. Painters in the body shop of a car plant paint cars. Painting is the process of doing their job.

- **Organisational skills**

This is the ability to organise work not just react to it. Organisational skill describes the organisation required to do the job. A word processor operator organises materials to do the work, analyses and designs formats and layout according to the particular project, for example a letter and a report require different organisation. The painter organises the materials for the day or week, for example what colour paint is required on a particular day.

- **Interpersonal skills**

This is the ability to communicate with others. Interpersonal skills describe the communication required to carry out the job. A word processor operator discusses work projects, communicates layout proposals, corrects grammar, reads and interprets instructions and communicates with co-workers and managers. The car painter communicates with co-workers and supervisors about the planning and execution of a job.

The Labour Research Centre Inc. has found that most tasks require the worker to have a combination of all three types of skills. It is therefore important that when identifying the skills required to perform a job that all three types of skills are identified for example identifying only technical skills will give an inaccurate picture of what skills a worker requires to perform his or her tasks.

Current hierarchies of skill value manual and technical skills which are predominantly held by men, and undervalue operational and interpersonal skills which are predominantly utilised in 'women's' work. In the process of identifying skills three simple questions need to be answered:

- Why identify skill?
- When to identify skill?
- What methodology to use?

### *Why identify skill?*

In the identification of skill, it is important to be clear of the objective. The objective highlights the particular relevance of methodologies and will define the process to be used. If the objective is to review industry skills to assist in the establishment of skill-related career paths with complimentary training, and identify the current skills used in an industry or enterprise, then you will select a methodology which allows analysis of a cross-section of organisations and occupations. If your objective is to identify the skills of each individual and develop an appropriate training program for career development, then the methodology you select will involve all the workforce. This type of review requires confidentiality of information. A skill review will not give you information on future skill, but an assessment of current skill levels. Future skill requirements are identified by establishing the direction of the industry or enterprise in terms of technology and work organisation.

### *When to identify skill?*

Industry and unions may decide to conduct an industry-wide skill assessment to assist in the establishment of the new award based on skill-related career paths. A skill review can also identify problems in current classification structures and highlight aspects for skill development and training. Enterprise skill reviews may be conducted to identify the current skill levels and training requirements for career paths. Skill reviews can also assist in developing training programs for an area affected by new technology, or to assess the skills of workers in areas which are decreasing to allow for the development of retraining programs.

### *What methodology to use?*

Put simply, the steps in a skill review are as follows:

- 1 Establish the objective for the conduct of the review.
- 2 Establish the skills used in the industry or enterprise.
- 3 Develop a survey to assess skill.
- 4 Conduct the survey.
- 5 Collate the information.
- 6 Analyse the information in line with your objective.

All methodologies should follow the six steps; however, in selecting a methodology, the following issues are important to ensure equity of skill valuation.

- Participation

It must be recognition that the people who understand the jobs are those who do them, and therefore they must participate in all stages of the reviews. It must also be recognised that some groups of workers undervalue the skills that they have—especially women. Built into the methodology must be ways which allow all groups to assess their skills fairly. All those participating must *understand* what is happening and *why* it is occurring—workers will rightly feel threatened if they perceive that management could use the information to promote the already highly skilled workers. The use of shop stewards and union members for interviewing is an excellent methodology for involvement.

- Recognising all types of skills

As I mentioned earlier, there are three types of skills:

- 1 Operational the ability to organise the work rather than just reacting to it;
- 2 Technical the skill a person needs to do the required job; and
- 3 Social interpersonal skills which allow management and communication, or allow you to get on with each other, management of others.

Skill reviews should assess all three kinds of skill. Current hierarchies of skill tend to value technical skills higher than operational and social skills.

- Task and skill—the need for clarity of definition

A task is the observable component of the job. It can be broken down into bits to establish a series of further tasks. Skill is the knowledge and attitudes involved in safely and competently performing the task. Make sure that you are conducting a skills analysis—not a task analysis. Taylorism is a work organisational theory that breaks jobs into smaller and smaller tasks, taking away skill and responsibility from the job, and moving them up the hierarchy. The current mood is to increase the skills of the workforce, not limit them further. Skills reviews should look at skills and develop training and career paths for building skills.

- Future skills

Skill reviews assess *current* skills only, and gaps within those skill levels allow for the development of career paths within the current

situation. To develop future skills, you need to assess and identify what skills will be required for the future compared to current skills, and develop an appropriate training program.

- Work redesign

In many instances, the development of career paths will require the redesign of work to build skill-related career paths. If current jobs are made up of bits and the aim is to get workers to do complete jobs, then the work needs to be redesigned to achieve this.

- Measuring competency

The emerging area of debate in skill analysis is the issue of competency. How do you measure competency?

## Summary

In summary, I have discussed the need to be clear of your objective in the use of skill reviews. Your objective will identify the most appropriate methodology and ensure outcomes are in line with your objectives. When selecting a methodology, remember:

- Consider your objective.
- Methodologies can be changed to suit the workforce.
- Use the review to increase the skills of members and shop stewards.
- Make sure *skills* are being assessed, not just tasks.
- Check for management bias in any weighting of skill.
- Question the use of the review, particularly at the enterprise level. It is essential for enterprise-level reviews that privacy of information is maintained.

## References

Labour Research Centre Inc. (1990), *Pay Equity for Women in Australia*, Labour Research Centre Inc., Melbourne.

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## SECTION 3

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# WOMEN AND AWARD RESTRUCTURING IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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MIRA ROBERTSON

I approach this topic from my perspective as an appointed official of the Australian Services Union (Victorian Branch), and I want to look at award restructuring in local government, and at the implications for women workers in the industry. I am going to refer to the report written by myself and Ana Kokkinos, *Career Paths and Training for Women in Local Government* (DEET 1991) although I am going to develop some points that were not the focus of that particular report.

## Background

First of all I need to set the scene by going over some facts, albeit very briefly. We know that the labour market position of women is markedly different from that of men. One of the most distinctive features of the labour force is its gender segmentation. This occupational and industry segregation represents two major causes for the current position of women in the labour market, and as you know that position is not a good one. Other papers more than adequately cover this issue and the outline of the Pay Equity Report by Anne Byrne gives us an overview of the current situation.

Now this occupational segregation that I have referred to is also a significant feature of women's employment participation in the local government sector. And local government awards have to date essentially reflected and encouraged this segregation, as well as Taylorist work organisation and job design. This has occurred through narrow occupationally specific career streams with overt or indirect barriers to mobility between streams, some classifications

with little or no career structure, and long occupational pay scales often unrelated to significant changes in skill levels.

Clearly the problem of gender segmentation of the Australian workforce is a central issue in improving women's position in the labour market. It is an entrenched structural problem and it impacts on overall labour force flexibility. We argued in our report that unless the interrelationship between gender segmentation and labour force flexibility is taken into account during the award restructuring process, then the development of a highly flexible, skilled and adaptive workforce at an industry and enterprise level will not be achieved. The very position of women in the local government workforce means that they provide the greatest potential for skill expansion in local government. To quote briefly from the report:

The essential features of women's participation in the local government workforce still remain. Tackling gender segmentation of the workforce as part of the award restructuring process is a key factor to freeing up the sector's skill base and potential.

Women provide the greatest potential for skill expansion in local government. While women remain locked into a narrow range of jobs where they have little chance of developing their skill potential, local government is denied the resource their skills would provide. (DEET 1991, p. 8)

## **The introduction of the Local Authorities Interim Award**

So with those comments in mind, what has actually happened in the award restructuring process in local government? On 1 September 1991 the new Local Authorities Interim Award came into operation after more than two years of negotiation, testing, and finally, arbitration. The award provides a single classification stream of eight bands plus a senior executive officer range, and covers all workers in local government from blue collar, white collar, professional and managerial, excluding only the chief executive officer. It is a radical departure from the past where the three main awards had many occupationally specific classifications, some with incremental pay scales, others with spot salary points. I should point out that the three main awards have in the restructuring process, been incorporated into the one award.

The new pay structure is comprised of eight bands with three to four pay levels in each band. National Minimum Rates are incorporated into the entry level of the bands where relevant. The classification definitions for each band are considerably more comprehensive than the previous award definitions and



incorporate such criteria as accountability and extent of authority, judgment and decision making, specialist knowledge and skills, management skills, interpersonal skills, qualifications and experience .

The award identifies three criteria which must be met for individuals to progress from level to level within a classification band. These criteria are skill acquisition and utilisation, performance and twelve months satisfactory service. Both the skill and performance criteria are negotiated on an individual level between an employee and their supervisor / manager, and appeal rights involving union representation are included. The new award also includes a clause on consultative committees, whereby each local authority must set up a joint union / management consultative committee to deal with matters relating to productivity, efficiency, career paths, skill development and training. The ASU policy with regard to the committees, is for both male and female union representatives to participate.

So very briefly, that is the shape of the new award covering all local government employees. I should point out that I have not outlined the other considerable changes to award conditions.

## Outcomes of award restructuring

All parties involved in the industry: unions, management, employer bodies, councillors and government departments with responsibility for local government, have, over the last few years, maintained that successful award restructuring was essential if key problems within the sector were to be properly addressed. The National Review of Local Government Labour Markets, an initiative of the Local Government Ministers Conference in 1986, which produced a wide-ranging array of research and discussion papers over the period from 1986 to 1988, said in its final report that if award restructuring was not successfully implemented in local government then skill shortages, segmentation and rigidity of the workforce would continue and an opportunity to enhance individuals' jobs, open up career paths, and increase productivity and efficiency would be lost.

While, at the time of writing this paper, it is too early to say whether award restructuring in local government has been successfully implemented or not, it is certainly possible to look at trends and indications.

I think it is perfectly obvious to most people that the restructuring of the actual award does not in itself create productivity and efficiency or more satisfying jobs with better career paths and better pay. And that is certainly the

case in local government. But the new award has eliminated the award barriers that previously existed to career path development and skill formation. It has put in place significant financial incentives for employees to gain skills and the award classification definitions clearly intend that a much wider range of skills can be used and tasks performed at any particular band. However, given my statement at the beginning of the paper, I would argue that the success of restructuring must eventually be measured by the effect it has on women's position within the industry.

## The position of women within the industry

In our research report we identified three major and interrelated factors which have combined to reinforce the employment patterns and opportunities for women. They are: the notion and definition of skill, the acquisition of skill and the organisation of work. The report itself also identified a fourth factor which overlays all of the above and that is the prevailing attitudes and values about women workers and their aspirations. I want to examine these factors in a bit more detail in the light of the restructuring process.

### *The notion and definition of skill*

The first factor is the notion and definition of skill. It is now well established that there is a lack of recognition of women's skills. Game and Pringle (1983) put it succinctly in *Gender at Work*: 'The definition of skill is gender biased. The process by which some jobs are defined as skilled and others as unskilled is complex, but by and large, women's skills are not recognised as such in the definition of their jobs. Skilled work is men's work'. Clearly this is an issue that must be addressed throughout the award restructuring process. New classification structures are critical in eliminating gender bias. Classification definitions must recognise all types of skill and not describe traditional female tasks, such as stenographic and typing skills, at the bottom levels of new structures. To do so would obviously perpetuate ghettos of women in low-paid jobs. I have to confess that we cannot say with any certainty at this stage whether the new classification definitions in the Local Authorities award have properly addressed this issue of gender-neutral skill definition. Certainly we have overcome the obvious problems of classification streams which identified and grouped jobs according to whether they were male or female, for example the old technical stream which was predominantly male versus the clerical stream

which was predominantly female. And perhaps it is not going to be pure problem of the new definitions anyway, but of the way work is organised described as well.

### *The acquisition of skill*

The second factor is the manner in which skills have been acquired because also determines the notion of skilled and unskilled work. The fact is that traditional male occupations involve formal, accredited training and female occupations do not, and are therefore seen as semiskilled or unskilled. The report found from existing information that the general picture of women's participation in local government education and training tended to mirror general patterns, whereby women, if they did receive training tended to be over-represented in task-specific, on-the-job training which is not accredited and therefore not readily transferable. Part of the report also involved a survey of women working in local government in Tasmania and Victoria as well as anecdotal information gathered from the survey group and a smaller group of women in Western Australia. The survey found that there are major barriers to women in local government's participation in education and training and accessing career paths. I am going to refer specifically to the survey results in Tasmania because we surveyed a third of the total ASU women membership in that state, but the results were generally confirmed in Victoria. To begin with 60% of the survey group had no post-secondary qualifications; a slightly higher percentage than the national average for women of 56.3%. When asked about their future in the industry, a significant majority (65%) said they wanted to be working in the industry in five years' time. This had dropped to 35% in ten years' time, but this is still a significant percentage and given the age profile of the group it is reasonable to assume that many of those wishing to leave the workforce would be doing so for child-bearing and child-care reasons, and a significant percentage would seek to re-enter at a later date.

The survey group were asked what they thought posed the greatest problem or obstacle to them getting further training. Lack of encouragement and management was the single most commonly cited obstacle to undertaking training in both the survey groups (Tasmania and Victoria). This was closely followed by cost, inconvenient course times, distance and lack of transport, and family responsibilities. The survey results also showed that a high proportion of women wanted to undertake training (58%) and that paid study leave and financial help from the employer and support from managers and supervisors were necessary preconditions for many women. With regard to the gr

knowledge about available training courses, both in-house and external, almost half the women (42%) had no knowledge of available in-house training, whereas 17% had no knowledge of external training courses. In response to the question about whether women are discriminated against in getting access to training, 31% of the group said 'yes'. In Victoria half the women answered 'yes' to this question. Of those women who were studying, 19% were receiving paid study leave and 34% were receiving no assistance whatsoever from their employer.

So, in relation to skills acquisition, we cannot assume, to use an over-worked metaphor, that there is a level playing field for women. The manner in which women acquire skills and the obstacles they face in this process, will clearly continue to influence their employment patterns and opportunities. The restructured award places a clear emphasis on gaining skills. But the big question remains, will women be able actually to take advantage of this emphasis given the kind of obstacles that exist. And if they are given access to training, will it be the accredited, transferable training, or will it be in-house training undertaken by fly-by-night consultants who have no links into formal accredited courses.

### *The organisation of work*

The third factor is work organisation and it is this factor that I want to dwell on because I believe that it is perhaps the most fundamental issue. That is not to say that we must not address all issues. It is certainly vital that we do not get sidetracked into focusing on one issue without recognising that a range of factors need to be addressed concurrently. The fact is that all of these issues are inextricably linked.

We know that the position of women in local government reflects the overall position of women in the workforce: that is they are clustered in a relatively narrow range of occupations and jobs; they are overwhelmingly represented in the lower bands of the classification and pay structures; as a group they hold less formal qualifications than their male counterparts; and so on.

In the recent ASU publication, *Work Redesign, Changing Work Organisation in Local Government*, job descriptions from a range of metropolitan and provincial city councils were analysed and some of the characteristics that were revealed were:

- There was a high degree of task specialisation and repetition in lower level administrative jobs, such jobs mainly held by women.

- Many jobs at the lower end of the classification structures involved a very limited range of tasks with little variety, autonomy.
- Lower level jobs had very limited authority and accountability.
- Responsibility for the work was often held by supervisors and not the employees who performed the work.
- There were extended hierarchies with multiple layers of supervision and management.
- In many cases work was organised into relatively small specialist sections, with each section then having its own supervisory and management structure. In some areas this tended to create mini career paths for some individuals while keeping the majority of employees at the lower end of the career and pay structure, carrying out jobs with very specialised, routine and repetitive tasks.
- Most decision making, design of work flows, and responsibility for overall outcomes and quality control were confined to middle and senior management.
- Policy and planning roles were largely carried out by supervisors and managers and not by the people actually doing the work.

The Labor Research Centre report, *Working Locally: A Study of Skills Used in Local Government, 1989* found that:

the organisation of work in local government is characterised by narrow specialist streams in a multitude of disciplines. Each stream has its own management structure, specialist staff and administrative officers. There are few opportunities to move horizontally between the specialist streams, except at the bottom where unspecialised administrative officer can be moved between departments at managements whim. Very little opportunity exists for specialist staff to move between departments because of the high degree of specialisation.

Fred Emery, an internationally recognised work organisation expert, has been sounding warning bells about award restructuring since the beginning. In his article 'The light on the hill—skill formation or the democratization of work', he argues that focusing on skill formation will not lead to greater productivity, efficiency or greater opportunities for satisfying work and career paths. The problem, as he puts it, is the form of work organisation currently in place, and the only solution is the democratisation of work. He says that there is no way that investments in skill formation will lead to higher productivity, and that such investments will have the unintended consequence of protecting

and bolstering the old form of work organisation, of sustaining low productivity and congealing the islands of poverty and unemployment. And they will do that if the demand for skilling does not arise from the felt demands of industry because the investments will flow down through the bodies that have educated and controlled training for the old form of work organisation.

The scenario sketched out by Emery is compelling in its applicability to local government, where the dominant form of work organisation owes a substantial debt to scientific management (or Taylorism as it is more widely known). And where management has always shown a preference for achieving efficiencies through cost-cutting and a very low commitment to staff training and education. Now that skill formation is clearly the emphasis and focus of the new award classification and pay structure, the consequences of maintaining the old forms of work organisation may well be to encourage the formation of a small elite of skilled workers and a mass of unskilled workers, shut off from the career paths and opportunities offered to the elite. The impact on women workers would undoubtedly be most severe given their existing position within the local government workforce. For example, I have spoken to some of my MEU (Municipal Employees Union) colleagues about the home-care area. Now there are a range of skills needed in the home-care area and some of those skills are finally being valued at a higher level than other skills. Obviously the union's objective is that through the processes of the new award people should be given training and a range of work to enable them to work across the full range of skills. But if you have a form of work organisation that refers back to a Taylorist model, then management is just as likely to say, 'Great, we'll give the higher skilled work to one or two people and they can do it all the time and be paid at a higher rate, and we don't need to train the rest, or give them career paths or pay them beyond the bottom rate'. There is going to be nothing automatic about offering the opportunity for skill development to a wider group if the reference point is still Taylorist work organisation.

In support of what I am saying, anecdotal information from the women in the survey also showed that where women did get access to training, they often could not apply it because they were locked into very defined jobs which did not need additional skill or knowledge to be performed.

Additional training did not guarantee a career path. In addition the survey showed that despite the majority of the survey group wanting a career in local government, lack of career paths per se was a major obstacle. Consistent with Fred Emery's position, our information indicates that training and skill acquisition alone will not improve the position of women if work organisation does not also change. Unfortunately the reality is that local government management does not seem to understand these issues at all. They have the

most limited notion of what work organisation is about, that is if they have any idea at all. To my knowledge there are only two local authorities that are involved in a concerted way with the issue and both of these are being assisted by the Labour Research Centre. Naturally the unions are also involved and we are eagerly awaiting the outcomes at both the City of Melbourne and the Shire of Lilydale.

### *Discrimination*

I want to refer to one final issue that came out of the report, and that was the prevailing attitudes about women and their aspirations within the workforce. Women identified lack of encouragement and discrimination by managers and supervisors as a significant obstacle to gaining training and promotion. A particularly disturbing result from the survey was that 23% of the Tasmanian survey group and 40% of the Victorian group believed that women were discriminated against in regard to promotion. The issue of discrimination and lack of support from managers and supervisors was a constant thread throughout the survey results and the anecdotal material. So while work organisation, valuing of skills, acquisition of skills and the defining of skills are all critical issues, it is also very important to deal with these pervasive issues of discrimination. Clearly they serve to prevent women from achieving promotion, from applying for training, and from fulfilling their potential within the workforce. The ASU has made it clear that these issues must also be tackled by the employer organisations and senior management within local authorities themselves.

### **Conclusion**

So women have the most to gain if award restructuring is properly implemented, but they also stand to have their existing position entrenched and worsened if the restructuring process does not radically change the existing patterns of work organisation.

I believe then that the critical agenda for the unions and for the industry as a whole, is job and work redesign and the democratisation of work. However, although I have focused on work organisation as the critical factor, I should really qualify that because no single issue will resolve the current problems. I think it is vital that we are not sidetracked into focusing on one single issue without recognising that a range of factors needs to be worked on concurrently and I would see the main factors as being:

- work organisation (within that is the issue of forging new kinds of career paths);
- training;
- recognition and valuing of skills; and
- challenging and changing attitudes about women's roles and aspirations within the workforce.

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# THE TRANSPORT INDUSTRY: ANOTHER CHALLENGE FOR WOMEN

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ROBYN FRANCIS

## Introduction

As Executive Director of the Transport and Storage Industry Training Board my first shock was to have to adjust to an industry where women hardly exist in the management structures and even at the operational level. I had come from a position where I had worked largely with women, to this. One of my first responsibilities was to attend the Australian Road Transport Federation's convention where, on the first day, I was asked a number of times, 'And whose wife are you?'. I really *was* the only woman participating in the business of the convention. Any other women were accompanying their husbands; several of them approached me to ask, 'Are you coming on the girls' shopping hour?'.

In this paper I wish to examine the impact of the award restructuring process to date, the relative position of women across the different industry sectors covered by the Board, the effect of massive technological change and the training issues to be addressed. I shall then briefly consider some possible solutions.

### *Award restructure in the transport industries*

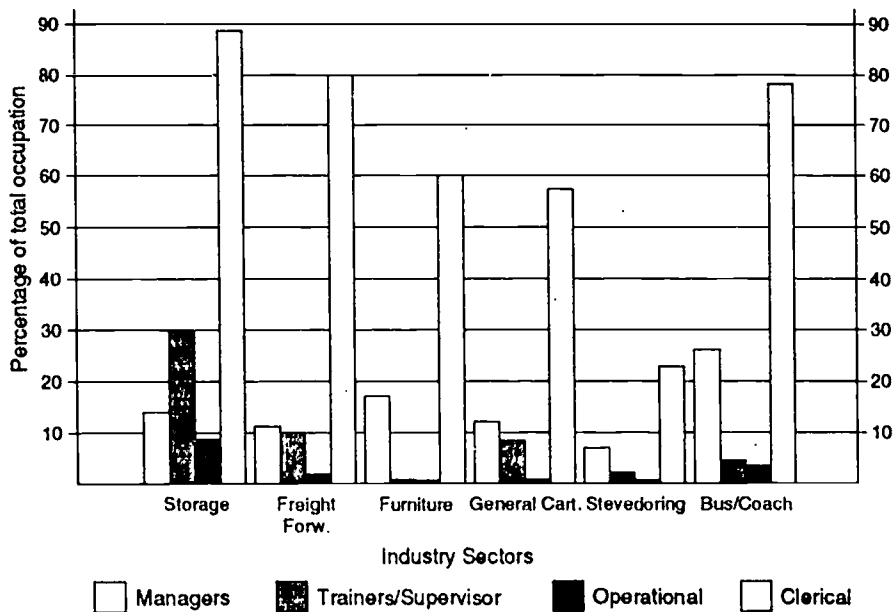
The transport and storage industries cover the road transport sector, by far the largest sector in transport and ranging through road freight, private bus and coach and taxis. Then it also includes the storage/warehousing industry, the waterfront, the maritime sector, the air transport industry and, last but not least,

the public transport sector. The award restructure achievements for these sectors are very patchy. On the waterfront and in the maritime sectors the new awards or enterprise-based agreements are in place. But in the other sectors, such as road transport and public transport the new award structures are a long way off. In public transport they cannot even agree on how many people are employed in the sector, let alone on the new awards.

### Women in the industry

There is little comfort here for women. No-one should be surprised about the gender segregation of the industry. Our survey of 1300 companies across the industry (see Figure 1) revealed that women are there in the workforce, but largely only because of their traditional clerical/administrative roles. In some male-dominated sectors such as the waterfront, for instance, women only occupy a little over 20% of the total clerical positions in the sector! No sector records female participation at the operational level at greater than 10% of the total number, and at the management level less than 20% of total employees are women. We were surprised to find that the most promising area for women was the storage industry where clearly there were more of them doing the sorting and picking and driving fork-lifts as well as dominating the traditional clerical positions.

Figure 1 Women by occupational group



### *Can training make a difference to the gender imbalance?*

This is an industry without a training culture. There is little history of training, let alone structured, accredited training. Except where international standards apply, as they do in the maritime industry and, even more so, in the air transport industry, there is little training beyond minimal license training which is imposed by regulators maintaining safety standards. In industries such as the automotive, heavy engineering and building industries the apprenticeship system has at least provided a benchmark for training for the blue-collar workforce. To enter most of the operational positions in the transport industries only an endorsed license is required. Any other training is acquired on the job, making that initial training the crucial, and expensive, first step.

The Board has quite a challenge. It has argued for a new entry-level course, a Certificate in Occupational Studies (COS) for transport and distribution, which, we believe, will have long-term implications for the industry. Clearly the Board can tag a number of those positions for women, and then actively promote the employment of those graduates. There is a far greater chance of attracting women into the industry by this means when there is an infrastructure through training institutions to support them.

### *Technological change*

This is an industry undergoing enormous technological change. As a service industry there are two significant trends which will affect the workforce and the public served. Firstly, the industry seeks to achieve greater productivity by moving to larger equipment with greater carrying capacity and more fuel economy. On the waterfront containerisation has meant that the job of the stevedore no longer involves manual handling of cargo; instead stevedores are mostly skilled drivers of the straddle carriers, the giant container fork-lifts and the portainer cranes. In the road freight industry the move is to the huge B-doubles with almost twice the capacity of a normal heavy articulated vehicle. The expectation is that operators will be multi-skilled, but at the moment this is largely achieved through experience on the job. When we have an acceptance of the need for a more structured approach to on- and off-the-job training for this industry is when greater opportunities for women will be provided.

Secondly, the impact of electronic data interchange (EDI) will be particularly felt in this industry. Currently the movement of cargo from ship to customer, consignor to consignee, is bedevilled by an extraordinary array of documentation, some of the documentation pro-formas dating back at least a century. Now all information on the cargo will be transmitted electronically

from ship to shore and onwards. The work of the clerical and administrative occupations in the transport industry will be changed dramatically—and do not forget that this is where women are primarily employed in this industry.

The impact of this change is seen in sharpest focus where the distribution and warehousing industries intersect. Increasingly the manufacturing industry is divesting itself of warehousing, consistent with the principles of JIT (Just-In-Time—maintaining small inventories, planning logistics so that storage of raw materials and the finished product is minimised). Increasingly, the transport companies manage the storage and distribution through their 'contract warehousing', achieving the economies of scale desired by the industry. That huge warehouse at Hoppers Crossing, seen from the Geelong Road and managed as a joint venture by K-Mart/Linfox is the main national distribution centre for K-Mart. The inventories and ordering system all managed electronically and being run by a relatively small number of staff, allow for a 24-hour turnaround of orders—that is delivery of the order within twenty-four hours to anywhere in Australia.

### *The future for training*

The industry wants training and is definitely lifting its game. But what is the impact for the average worker of that? Our research has demonstrated that much of the training occurring is unaccredited and on-the-job so that participants receive benefits and recognition while they remain with that employer. But what about their career path and the relevance of that training beyond that enterprise?

Women are particularly disadvantaged by this trend. As a pilot the Board has attempted to persuade the air transport industry, most notably the two major domestic airlines, to accredit their internal training of their clerical/administrative staff through documentation and registration with the TAFE private provider system. The project has been unsuccessful to date. It would appear that this part of the industry is committed to training so long as it does *not* contribute to their employees receiving accreditation for their skills as well as transferability of them.

## **Conclusion**

So, we need to develop a training culture, but we need to remember that accredited training is really the only way that workers are going to receive real

recognition and transferability for their acquired skills. This is an industry where award restructure is going to be slow and hard-won. And it is not going to deliver any more opportunities to women who are in a segregated part of the industry, currently undergoing enormous technological change. The change we want for this industry in more on- and off-the-job training, particularly at entry level, might provide more opportunities for women who wish to enter the industry, more than ever before.

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# WOMEN'S SKILLS IN COMMUNITY SERVICES

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SUSAN KENNA

I wish to describe a skills analysis of local government community services workers. The project was undertaken in Victoria, by the Municipal Employees' Union and was funded by DEET, through the Women's Bureau's WREIP funding. The vast majority of the workers in the sector are women who receive a low rate of pay and low status within their councils—despite the importance of the service they provide and the considerable skills they bring to their work. The Union initiated the project in anticipation of the possible effects of award restructuring, on its community services members. It wished to document and analyse the workers' skills, in order to inform the industrial negotiations for the restructured Local Government Award.

The project's aims were:

- identify the 'informal' skills brought by community services workers to their jobs;
- identify the skills acquired on the job, through on-the-job training and experience; and
- document these skills to ensure that the new classification structure to emerge from the award restructuring process would provide a career path for community services workers.

The project centred around home-care workers, who make up the majority of the Union's community services membership. (There are approximately 7000 home-care workers employed in Victorian local government.)

## Background

Under the major MEU Award prior to restructuring (the Local Governing Authorities Employee's (Victoria) Award, 1984), community services employees had a distinct classification structure. This structure was inserted following a work value case before the Industrial Relations Commission, in 1986. The structure was comprised of eight levels, within two grades, (with two rates of pay overlapping, effectively providing six distinct salary points). Although the structure theoretically provided a career path for community services employees, the criteria for movement within the structure proved to be too broad, and therefore open to misuse by employers. Indeed, by 1991, 90% of home-care workers remained on the classification of Community Services Employee, Grade 1A—at the base of the supposed career structure. The outcomes of the skills analysis proved that the extent of skills and experience held, and training completed by the workers, could not justify this concentration of workers on the lowest possible pay rate. The classification structure in the restructured Local Government Award needed to reflect more accurately and reward the skills of community services workers.

## Methodology

The Union set out to identify its members' skills, through a participative process. To this end, a modified DACUM technique was used, to establish a tasks inventory and identify the skills, knowledge and other attributes of community services workers. Juliet Frizzell, from the Labour Research Centre Inc., conducted two 2-day workshops of community services shop stewards, in conjunction with three officials from the MEU. Approximately eighty shop stewards attended the workshops from areas of community services representing:

- home care
- centre-based child-care
- home-based child-care
- kitchen assistance
- meals on wheels
- cooks
- adult day-care workers

Ninety per cent of participants were home-care workers, and one was a male shop steward working in home care.

The Union wished to establish the full extent of the workers' responsibilities as *care* workers, to ensure that their work would be fairly valued under the new classification structure. The workers therefore went beyond identifying their functions and skills, and discussed the full range of factors impacting on their work. At the end of the workshops, the workers had established lists of their:

- tasks
- skills/knowledge
- training completed
- range of clients
- occupational health and safety hazards
- equipment used

The participants at the workshops were given an introduction to award restructuring, including detail on the need to develop a meaningful career path which would reward them for skills acquired. The workers were introduced to the concept of skill and, for the purposes of identifying their own skills, were asked to think about their technical, operational/organisational, and interpersonal/communication skills.

The way in which the workers *described* their skills was indicative of the way in which 'caring' skills have traditionally been described, and therefore valued. In identifying their interpersonal skills in particular, the workers referred to such qualities as patience, diplomacy and sympathy. This is problematic, because when women describe their skills as 'personal attributes', they are often dismissed as skills that are 'natural' to them, rather than being seen as valuable and *learnt* skills. (Kim Lazenby and Cate Poynton (1992) have conducted some interesting research on the way in which 'women's' skills are traditionally described and consequently undervalued in the industrial arena.) The skill categories used in the workshops were broad, and in turn, these generated more specific types of skill categories. These were:

- interpersonal skills
- communication skills
- knowledge of Council services
- administrative skills
- specialist knowledge



From the information obtained in the workshops, a questionnaire was developed and circulated to a representative sample of workers for validation of the workshop data (see Appendix, p. 121). The questionnaire was administered face-to-face, by MEU officials, during meetings of their community services membership.

The process just outlined was itself beneficial to the workers involved. The workshop participants, in particular, achieved positive outcomes prior to the project's completion. Identifying their skills and sharing their experiences with fellow workers, proved to be an educative and encouraging process. At the end of the workshops, the shop stewards had considerably raised their expectations about how their work should be valued.

## Outcomes

The results of the skills analysis project fed directly into the award restructuring process in Victorian local government, through ensuring a fairer deal for community services workers under the new award. The findings of the project can be summarised as follows:

- The workers are multi-skilled, in a range of interpersonal, communication and technical skills.
- The overwhelming majority of skills were gained through experience, on-the-job, or through informal training.
- The skills the workers gained through experience, are indicative of both the nature of community services work (i.e. the workers must 'learn' on-the-job as their working conditions and clients' needs demand), and the lack of formal training available.
- A Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process needs to be undertaken to assess the skills held by local government community services workers, and training curriculum developed to reflect skill requirements.
- The range of skills held by the workers are not reflected in their rate of pay. (Even based on experience alone, the workers were not getting a fair deal. Forty-three per cent of the workers had been in their jobs between 6 and 15 years, and yet the overwhelming majority were graded on the base grade of the classification structure, Grade 1A.)

Prior to the project's completion, the MEU used data obtained from the skills workshops in negotiations over the new award definitions. A comprehen-

sive list of tasks was developed, which was validated during the negotiations by shop stewards who had participated in the workshops, and council community services supervisors. Based on this list of tasks, the final definitions for community services work were agreed and inserted into the new Victorian Local Authorities (Interim) Award, 1991. Home-care workers providing respite care (that is, care for a frail elderly person or severely disabled child in the absence of the usual carer), are now being paid the equivalent of trades people under the new award.

However, the award structure still does not adequately reflect the *mix* of skills required by home-care workers in particular. The workers now have a more accessible career path, but in the writing of the new definitions, judgments were made which distinguished certain skills—personal care skills—as being more valuable than other skills. The reality is that home-care workers are, and always have been *multi-skilled*, and the Union needs to think carefully about how the new structure can better reflect this in the future.

Though the workers have already gained from the project, the Union recognises that there is still a long way to go to redress the inappropriate relativities between many blue-collar, male-dominated occupations in local government and community services occupations. (Sara Charlesworth (1993) has examined this pay equity issue, through a comparison of home-care work and the essentially male-dominated gardening stream in Victorian Local Government.) In the report on the Union's project, I argue that there needs to be a fundamental shift in the way that we value the caring occupations, in comparison to the way in which the technical skills required of most male-dominated jobs have been recognised in awards (Municipal Employees Union 1992). This will require a major commitment from both Victorian local government, and the Australian Industrial Relations Commission.

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# Appendix

## Local Government Community Services Workers Validation Questionnaire Municipal Employees' Union

COUNCIL \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle the appropriate answer. You may circle more than one answer where appropriate.

### A. PERSONAL DETAILS

1. Sex
 

Male	1
Female	2
  
2. To what age group do you belong?
 

Less than 20 years	1
20 - 24 years	2
25 - 29 years	3
30 - 34 years	4
35 - 39 years	5
40 - 44 years	6
45 - 49 years	7
50 - 54 years	6
55 +	7
  
3. Do you have responsibility for any dependents?  
(eg. children, parents, relations)
 

Sole responsibility	1
Shared responsibility	2
None	3
  
4. (a) Do you have children aged under 15 years in your care?
 

Yes	1
No	2

(If no, go to question 5)

(b) How many of the children under your care are:-

Under 5 years (write number.....)	1
5 - 12 years (write number.....)	2
13 - 15 years (write number.....)	3

5. In which country were you born?

- Australia 1
- If Australia, are you an Aboriginal/  
Torres Strait Islander? 2  
3
- Greece 4
- Italy 5
- Malta 6
- United Kingdom 7
- Vietnam 8
- Spain 9
- South America 10
- Germany 11
- Holland 12
- Other (please specify ..... ) 13

6. (a) What language(s) do you speak?  
(you may circle more than one)

- English 1
- Greek 2
- Italian 3
- Maltese 4
- Vietnamese 5
- Spanish 6
- German 7
- Dutch 8
- Other (please specify ..... ) 9

(b) If you speak a language(s) other than English, do you  
use this/these language(s) in your community services work?

- Yes 1
- No 2

7. What is the highest level of formal education you have completed/are  
currently completing?

- Primary School 1
- Secondary School - Form 1-3 2
- Secondary School - Form 4-5 3
- Secondary School - Form 6 4
- Tertiary (please specify ..... ) 5
- Trade Qualifications (please specify ..... ) 6
- Other (please specify ..... ) 7

8. Did you gain any formal qualifications overseas? If so, please  
specify the highest level obtained.

- No overseas qualifications 1
- Primary School 2
- Secondary School - Form 1-3 3
- Secondary School - Form 4-5 4
- Secondary School - Form 6 5
- Tertiary (please specify ..... ) 6
- Trade Qualifications (please specify ..... ) 7
- Other (please specify ..... ) 8

9. In which area(s) of community services are you employed?  
(you may circle more than one)

General Home Care	1
Specific Home Care	2
Respite/Extended Care	3
Headway/Linkage/Intergration	4
Family Day Care	5
Family Aid	6
Child Care Centre	7
Meals-on-Wheels Assistant	8
Meals-on-Wheels Driver	9
Cook	10
Kitchen Assistant	11
Aged Hostel	12
Home Maintenance	13
School Crossing Supervisor	14
Other (please specify .....	15

10. What is the average number of hours you work each week in your community services job?

Less than 10	1
11-15	2
16-20	3
21-25	4
26-30	5
More than 30	6

11. On what basis are these hours worked?

Set number of hours per week	1
Minimum number of hours per week	2
Flexible number of hours per week	3

12. What is your current award classification or grade?

CSE 1A	1
1B	2
1C	3
1D	4
2A	5
2B	6
2C	7
2D	8
Grade 4	9
6	10
8	11
9	12
Other (please specify .....	13
Don't know	14

13. What is your work Status?
- |   |   |
|---|---|
| Permanent full-time                         | 1 |
| Permanent part-time                         | 2 |
| Permanent part-time (part-time 20% loading) | 3 |
| Casual                                      | 4 |
| Temporary                                   | 5 |
| Don't Know                                  | 6 |
14. How long have you been employed at your present Council?
- |                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| Less than 3 years  | 1 |
| 3-5 years          | 2 |
| 6-15 years         | 3 |
| More than 15 years | 4 |
15. Were you previously employed at another Council?
- |   |   |
|---|---|
| Yes   | 1 |
| If so, please specify length of employment<br>..... years | 2 |
| No  | 3 |
16. What previous work experience do you have?  
(you may circle more than one)
- |                              |    |
|------------------------------|----|
| Nursing                      | 1  |
| Administrative work          | 2  |
| Community Services Sector    |    |
| eg. Physical disability work | 3  |
| Intellectual disability work | 4  |
| Certified Child Care         | 5  |
| Other (please specify .....  | 6  |
| Hospitality Industry         |    |
| eg. Cooking                  | 7  |
| Waitressing                  | 8  |
| Other (please specify .....  | 9  |
| Not in the workforce         | 10 |
| Other (please specify .....  | 11 |
17. (a) Do you have more than one job?
- |     |   |
|-----|---|
| Yes | 1 |
| No  | 2 |
- (If No, go to Question 18)
- (b) If Yes, is this job in:-
- |   |   |
|---|---|
| Administrative work                               | 1 |
| Community service sector<br>(please specify ..... | 2 |
| Hospitality Industry<br>(please specify .....     | 3 |
| Other (please specify .....                       | 4 |

18. What requirements were advertised/asked of you, for your current position?  
(you may circle more than one)

Educational Qualifications	1
Experience in other community services work	2
Nursing Experience	3
Trade Qualifications (or equivalent)	4
Other (please specify .....	5

19. (a) Are you advised what training courses are available to you?

Yes	1
How are you notified (please specify .....	2
No	3

- (b) If so, are you given the opportunity to attend these courses?

Yes	1
No	2

20. Which of the following do you consider pose the greatest obstacle to your promotion prospects?  
(you may circle more than one)

Educational qualifications	1
Skills, training and experience	2
Supervisor	3
Discrimination because of your gender	4
Discrimination because of ethnic background	5
Indispensability: no one else knows my job and I feel obligated to stay	6
My Ability	7
Domestic and childcare responsibilities	8

21. Have you undertaken training in any of the following? (Please indicate whether the training was in-house (I/H) or external (E) (eg. at a TAFE or CAE).  
(you may circle more than one)

	(I/H)	(E)
(TAFE) Home Carers Course	1	1
(TAFE) Family Day Care Course	2	2
(TAFE) Geriatric Care Course	3	3
(CSV) Specific Home Care Course	4	4
Key Worker Course	5	5
Red Cross Course	6	6
Nursing	7	7
Disability/Special Needs Nursing	8	8
Cleaning	9	9
Handicapped Children's Care	10	10
Health and Safety Representatives Training	11	11
Shop Steward Training	12	12
Other Union Training	13	13
Workcare Training/Seminars	14	14
Rehabilitation Training/Seminars	15	15

	(I/H)	(E)
Care For: Blind	16	16
Alzheimers	17	17
M.S.	18	18
Epileptics	19	19
Diabetics	20	20
Stroke Victims	21	21
Schizophrenics	22	22
Deaf	23	23
Health and Hygiene	24	24
Literacy	25	25
Social Work	26	26
Counselling	27	27
Grief Training	28	28
Stress Management	29	29
Assertiveness	30	30
Sign Language	31	31
Child Abuse	32	32
Incontinence	33	33
Lifting	34	34
First Aid	35	35
Other (please specify .....	36	36
.....		
.....		

22. (a) Are you studying now?

Yes	1
No	2
(If no, go to question 23)	

(b) Are you receiving assistance from Council to study?

No	1
Study leave	2
Exam leave	3
Finance - books	4
Finance - fees	5
Other (please specify .....	6

23. Are you required or have you ever been required to provide on-the-job training for others?

Yes	
Showing new employees on-the-job	1
Structured/formal training	2
No	3

24. How often do you meet with other community services workers?

Daily	1
Once a week	2
Once a month	3
Only at staff meetings	4
At other times (please specify .....	5



25. How often are you able to discuss work-related matters with your supervisor?
- |                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| At anytime                           | 1 |
| Only at staff meetings               | 2 |
| By appointment                       | 3 |
| At other times (please specify ..... | 4 |
26. How long did it take you to learn your present job well?
- |                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Less than 2 weeks   | 1 |
| 2-4 weeks           | 2 |
| 1-3 months          | 3 |
| 3-6 months          | 4 |
| 6-12 months         | 5 |
| More than 12 months | 6 |
27. Have you received enough training to do your present job?
- |     |   |
|-----|---|
| Yes | 1 |
| No  | 2 |
28. What would you say is your main reason for working?
- |                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Economic                      | 1 |
| To develop a long-term career | 2 |
| To have independence          | 3 |
| For social contact            | 4 |
| Other (please specify .....   | 5 |
29. Please indicate which of the following you liaise and communicate with in the course of your community services work? (you may circle more than one)
- |                                   |    |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Doctors                           | 1  |
| Nurses                            | 2  |
| Paramedics                        | 3  |
| Hospitals                         | 4  |
| Chemists                          | 5  |
| Physiotherapists                  | 6  |
| Welfare Agencies                  | 7  |
| Geriatric Carers                  | 8  |
| Health Department                 | 9  |
| Social Workers                    | 10 |
| Support Groups                    | 11 |
| Relatives and friends             | 12 |
| Housing Commission                | 13 |
| Special Accommodation Houses      | 14 |
| Allied Professionals              | 15 |
| Hospice Workers                   | 16 |
| Interpreters                      | 17 |
| Lawyers                           | 18 |
| Bank Officers                     | 19 |
| Clergy                            | 20 |
| Funeral Directors and Undertakers | 21 |
| Shopkeepers                       | 22 |
| Teachers, Day Care Attendants     | 23 |

Training Providers	24
Police, Fire Brigade, State Emergency Services	25
Taxis	26
Rotary, Legacy, and other community groups	27
Community Services Victoria	28
SEC, Gas and Fuel	29
Plumbers	30
Delivery Services	31
Electrician	32
Vets and Lord Smith Home (animals)	33
RACV	34
Union	35
Neighbours	36
Others (please list .....)	37

COUNCIL

Supervisors	1
Assessment Officers	2
Home Maintenance Workers	3
Senior Citizens and Day Care Centres	4
Specialist Centres	5
Meals-on-Wheels Workers	6
Librarians	7
Community Bus Services	8
Health Inspectors	9
Pay Office	10
Family Day Care	11
Home Care	12
Community Health people	13
Other (please list .....)	14

B. T A S K S

Please indicate which of the following tasks you perform.  
 (NOTE: The tasks are divided into categories for simplification only. You may complete many tasks under each heading regardless of your Community Services Classification.)

1. HOUSEHOLD MAINTENANCE:

General Cleaning	1
Polishing	2
Washing	3
Ironing	4
Washing Dishes	5
Moving Furniture	6

Sweeping and hosing paths, patios etc.	7
Rubbish Removal	8
Weeding and watering garden	9
Attending to indoor plants	10
Arranging flowers	11
Repairing and checking safety of equipment	12
General Maintenance (hammering nails etc.)	13
Unclogging Drains	14
Picking Fruit	15
Chopping Wood	16
Cleaning Personal Equipment (wheelchairs, splints etc.)	17
Cleaning Comodes	18
Clearing Gardens and Sheds	19
Other	20

## 2. PERSONAL ASSISTANCE

Mending and sewing	1
Craft Activities	2
Musical Activities	3
Assistance with reading	4
Assistance with writing	5
Cleaning shoes	6
Preparing shopping lists	7
Shopping for groceries	8
Shopping for personal items	9
Banking/paying accounts	10
Transporting clients/children	
to appointments/activities	11
Posting mail	12

Filling out forms	13
Animal care	14
Prepare meals	15
Planning activities	16
Assistance for children with homework	17
Arranging funerals	18
Other.....	19

3. PERSONAL CARE

Preparing specific diets	1
Bathing/showering/washing	2
Monitoring medication	3
Assistance with therapy	4
Nail care	5
Hair care	6
Changing nappies	7
Changing sanitary pads	8
Taking clients/children for walks	9
Observing and reporting on clients'/childrens' health	10
Applying first aid	11
Shaving	12
Fitting callipers and splints	13
Changing urinary bags	14
Recording fluid/faeces output	15
Toilet training	16
Cleaning teeth	17
Cleaning blood/faeces/urine/vomit	18
Other.....	19

4. COMMUNITY BUS/MEALS-ON-WHEELS

Operating hoists	1
Driving bus/car	2
Fueling bus/car	3
Washing bus/car	4
Cleaning car fridges	5
Delivering meals	6
Accounting for money	7
Operating 2-way radio	8
Scheduling	9
Monitoring clients' health	10
Other.....	11

5. KITCHEN ASSISTANT/COOK

Plating meals	1
Cooking meals	2
Ordering food	3
Planning menus	4
Quality control	5
Stocktaking	6
Operating industrial kitchen equipment	7
Banking	8
Accounting for money	9
Use of industrial chemicals	10
Other.....	11

### C. CLIENTS

Which of the following types of clients have you or do you care for in your Community Services work:

Mentally Handicapped	1
Downs Syndrome	2
Brain Damaged	3
Cerebral Palsy	4
Autistic	5
Motor Neurone Disease	6
Intellectually Handicapped	7
Schizophrenics	8
Epileptics	9
Paraplegics/quadruplegics	10
Depressives	11
Hypochondriacs	12
Emphysema sufferers	13
Victims of Violence	14
Victims of Neglect	15
Grief Stricken	16
Visually impaired	17
Hearing impaired	18
Hyperactive	19
Parkinsons Disease	20
Hodgkinsons Disease	21
Cancer sufferers	22
Leukemia sufferers	23
Asthmatics	24
Drug Abusers	25
Alcoholics	26

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Diabetics	27
Aids sufferers	28
Arthritic/rheumatic	29
Stroke victims	30
Heart attack victims	31
Road accident victims	32
Alzheimers/dementia sufferers	33
Other.....	34

D. HEALTH AND SAFETY HAZARDS

Indicate which of the following safety or health hazards you have encountered.

Tripping (on toys, torn carpets, cords etc.)	1
Wet slippery areas	2
Moss covered/cracked concrete	3
Unfamiliar/unlit surroundings	4
Heavy lifting/awkward bending	5
Excessive noise	6
Dust	7
Pet excreta	8
Unsafe/old equipment	9
Non-accessible electrical outlets	10
Infectious diseases	11
Grief	12
Stress	13
Other.....	14

Which of the above do you feel is the biggest hazard you encounter?.....  
 .....  
 .....

E. SKILLS

Please detail the skills you possess by using the following criteria:

- Indicate whether or not you have the skill;  
 Yes (Y)  
 No (N)  
  
 Only answer the questions to the right if you circle yes.
- Determine the level of skill you feel you possess ie:  
 Basic (B)  
 Medium (M)  
 High (H)  
  
 For example, compare yourself to other community services workers when determining your rating.
- Indicate how the skill was obtained, through:  
 Formal Training (F)  
 In-house training (I/H)  
 By being shown by a workmate or supervisor (S)  
 Through Experience (E)
- Indicate how often you use the skill ie.  
 Many times a day 1  
 Daily 2  
 A couple of times per week 3  
 Monthly 4  
 Not Often 5



INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

	<u>HELD</u>		<u>COMPETENCY LEVEL</u>			<u>HOW OBTAINED</u>				<u>FREQUENCY</u>				
	Y	N	B	M	H	F	I/H	S	E	1	2	3	4	5
Sympathy	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Compassion	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Patience	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Diplomacy	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Judgement	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Self-motivation	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Flexibility	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Honesty	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Assertiveness	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Sociability	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Persuasiveness	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Supportiveness	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Encouragement	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Organisation	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Respectfulness	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Grief Management	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Stress Management	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Other.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

	<u>HELD</u>		<u>COMPETENCY</u>			<u>HOW</u>				<u>FREQUENCY</u>					
	<u>Y</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>LEVEL</u>			<u>OBTAINED</u>									
	1	2	<u>B</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>H</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>I</u>	<u>H</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>E</u>	1	2	3	4	5
Negotiate	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Advocate	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Mediate	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Listen	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Interpret	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Inform	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Stimulate	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Counsel	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Discipline	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Telephone Skills	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Sign Language	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Use of Communication	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Industrial Liaison	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Conduct Meetings	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Public Speaking	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
Other.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5
.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	5

COUNCIL SERVICES

	<u>HELD</u>		<u>COMPETENCY HOW</u>				<u>FREQUENCY</u>							
	<u>Y</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>LEVEL</u>		<u>OBTAINED</u>		1	2	3	4	5			
	1	2	B	M	F	I/H						S	E	
<u>KNOWLEDGE OF:</u>														
COUNCIL'S --														
Departments	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Policy Development	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Decision Making Process	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Legislation/Policy --														
WorkCare	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
OH&S	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
E.E.O	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Superannuation	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Training	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Awards	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Award Restructuring	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
HACC Guidelines	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Child Care Guidelines	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
C.S.V. Guidelines	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Funding Arrangements	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Government Departments	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Other.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5



ADMINISTRATIVE

	<u>HELD</u>		<u>COMPETENCY</u>			<u>HOW</u>					<u>FREQUENCY</u>				
	<u>Y</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>LEVEL</u>			<u>OBTAINED</u>									
	1	2	<u>B</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>H</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>I/H</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>E</u>	1	2	3	4	5	
Scheduling/Prioritising	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Writing Instructions	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Form Filling	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Banking	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Bookeeping	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Mailing	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Stock Taking	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Planning Menus	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Organising Outings	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Funding Applications	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Collecting Fees	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Writing Reports	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Minute Taking	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Issuing Notices	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Studying Policy/ legislation	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Filing	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Organising Relief staff	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
Other.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	
.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	

SPECIALIST KNOWLEDGE

	<u>HELD</u>		<u>COMPETENCY</u>			<u>HOW</u>				<u>FREQUENCY</u>				
	<u>Y</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>H</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>I/H</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Medical Terminology	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Allergies	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Special Dietary Needs —														
Ethnic	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Nutritional	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Children	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Large Scale Catering	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Hygiene	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
First Aid	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Emergency Procedures	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Lifting/Positioning														
clients	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Intergration	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5

	<u>HELD</u>		<u>COMPETENCY</u>			<u>HOW</u>				<u>FREQUENCY</u>				
	<u>Y</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>LEVEL</u>			<u>OBTAINED</u>								
	1	2	<u>B</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>II</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>I/H</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>E</u>	1	2	3	4	5
Therapy Programmes —														
Speech	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Drug/alcohol	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Pyhsiotherapy	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Hand and Foot Care	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Bathing	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Dressing	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Washing and fitting														
prosthetics	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Knowledge of pensioner social security/														
discounts/rights	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Childhood Development	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
Other.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
.....	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5

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## EQUIPMENT

Which of the following equipment/cleaning supplies do you use in your work?  
(Include those which you are required to service or clean)

Motorised/manual wheelchairs	1
Hoists	2
Colostomy/Catheter bags	3
Walking frames	4
Calipers/splints/braces	5
Communication Boards	6
Hearing aids	7
Comodes	8
Pushers	9
Nebulisers/sterilizers	10
Oxygen bottles	11
Household equipment	12
(eg. washing machines, video recorders etc)	
Car	13
Mini bus	14
Sporting equipment	15
Industrial kitchen equipment	16
Fuses/lights/lamps	17
Intercom	18
C.B. Radio	19
2-way radio	20
Tools	21
Industrial cleaning equipment and chemicals	22
Other .....	23

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# COMMUNITY SERVICE WORKERS AND PAY EQUITY

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SARA CHARLESWORTH

The Community Services Pay Equity Project examines the work done by community services employees in Victorian local government: that is, in the 'blue-collar' and overwhelmingly female occupations in home care, meals on wheels services and child-care. The project has been funded through the Equal Pay Unit of the Department of Industrial Relations and I should say at the outset that the project findings and conclusions are mine and do not necessarily represent those of the Unit or the Department.

The specific focus of the project is the work done by home-care workers or home helps as they used to be called. Home-care workers provided care and support to increasingly targeted groups of elderly and disabled people and their carers. The function, the objective of their work, is to maintain people in their homes and out of residential care as long they want and are able to remain so.

The work that home-care workers do then is tailored to meet the needs of individual clients. But while the work has been seen as very valuable, especially by the recipients of the service, it has been extremely difficult to value.

The major aim of my work is to look at ways of valuing the skills, especially the caring skills, of home-help workers. Even after the award restructuring process there is some concern within the MEU that the new award does not really come to grips with the skills involved in doing home-care work. The project aims to come up with *workable* strategies to ensure that pay equity is achieved for local government community service workers based on their actual and relative work value.

To do this I have built on earlier work done by the MEU in the Community Services Skills Project described by Sue Kenna, in getting the women who work in home care, to document what they do and the experience and skills they need



to do it. What I am doing is looking at the tasks and skills used by home-care workers in the context of a comparison with the traditionally male gardening occupations in local government.

This is proving to be a very valuable and interesting exercise. Firstly because in the award restructuring process in Victorian local government, the skills used by trade level gardeners have been revalued and old relativities that had been eroded over time have been re-established. (Under the old award, pay rates for those workers driving trucks, tractors and other articulated vehicles had overtaken the rates for trade level gardeners.) This revaluing has been accomplished relatively painlessly because its necessity appeared self-evident to both the Union and the relevant employer bodies. Needless to say, the valuing and revaluing of the work that women do, especially the home-care workers who do such stereotypical 'women's work', has not been so 'self-evident' nor straightforward.

Secondly, in the new restructured local government award home-care workers and the majority of those doing gardening work, have been placed in the same bottom three bands of the new classification structure. With predominantly female and predominantly male occupations being placed in the same classification structure for the first time, it has become possible to compare directly and evaluate the relative work value of typically male and female work.

In looking at the work done by these two groups of workers, I have concentrated on the *context* in which the tasks are undertaken and the skills that are used, rather than a comparison of one type of skill with another. Some of the factors I am looking at cover:

- the level and sort of responsibility required by the work;
- the level of initiative and judgment and decision-making required;
- the level of supervision under which the work is done; and
- the conditions in which the work is performed.

## Findings

In terms of pay equity for local government community service workers, the project findings on home-care work so far would indicate that there are several major barriers to pay equity even with the newly restructured award.

### *Undervaluation of work*

The project looked at the three skill levels for both home-care workers and gardeners under the new award and compared the tasks and skills used at these levels as well as the context in which the work was performed. An example of the differential valuing that is reflected by the new award is where both a general home-care worker and an assistant gardener who begin work at a council will be placed in Band 1. Typically a gardener at this level will not be expected to have any horticultural knowledge and will work under direct supervision, often on a task-by-task basis with someone standing over saying 'You take this plant from this tray and you put it in this hole like this, 2cms apart from the last plant'. That is, their skills are not taken for granted and fairly intensive on-the-job training is provided to get them up to speed on basic machine operation such as lawn mowing or using a brush cutter. This assistant gardener will work in a team or 'gang' and will not normally have to deal directly with the public, referring any inquiries up the line to a trade level gardener or Parks Officer.

A general home-care worker who begins work at the same council is expected already to have the necessary skills to clean and maintain a safe and hygienic living environment for the client as well as the necessary skills to provide appropriate social and emotional support. This home-care worker will be responsible for observing and reporting on the health and well-being of a wide range of clients from the frail elderly to post-operative patients. She will work on her own with minimal indirect supervision and be expected to know what to do in a crisis in particular situations. In some councils general home-care workers have been simply given the name and address of a client and told that they have one to two hours to do what is necessary. It is up to them to realise for example that when making a cup of tea for a patient with Parkinson's disease that the cup should only be half filled or to judge what sort of support and care is most appropriate given the needs of the client and the time allocated.

The survey findings indicate clearly that at the *bottom* level of the new classification structure where the assistant gardener/labourer and general home-care worker have been placed, the general home-care worker is more likely than is the assistant gardener/labourer to:

- be expected to have certain relevant skills and experience on entering the job;
- do more tasks and across a wider range of task areas; and
- use more skills and across a wider range of skill types from basic machine operation skills to more advanced skills of providing appropriate emotional/social support to clients and monitoring (observing

and reporting on) clients' general health and quality of life, drawing on a wide range of specialist knowledge to do so.

General home-care workers are also more likely than are the assistant gardeners/labourers to:

- take individual (rather than team) responsibility for their work;
- work to broad direction rather than under routine supervision; and
- be required to show a higher degree of initiative and be required to exercise a higher level of personal judgment.

These findings raise the obvious issue of the undervaluation of home-care work in the new award. An undervaluation that is in many ways inevitable because the skills that home carers use have been characterised as 'social' or 'interpersonal skills' and therefore not apparently comparable with other workers using plant and machine operation skills. The use of natural attributes to define or rather hide women's skills is well documented and is the norm in home care where supervisors will talk in terms of a worker '*having* the right personality' or '*being* empathetic'. In the project I have defined the caring skills, the job-specific skills, that home-care workers are required to use, as 'technical skills' so that what home-care workers actually do, as opposed to what they *are* or the personality characteristics they may *have*, is made explicit.

### *Allowances and overawards*

In the research project it became clear that one of the main causes of pay inequality relates to the different allowances available to the Parks and Gardens employees and community services employees. Even if equity in terms of work value could be achieved in the band structure, it is evident that this would not necessarily ensure pay equity. Even under the new award, community services workers are explicitly excluded from receiving the disability or industry allowance paid to outdoor council workers to compensate them for unpleasant conditions they work in. Evidence in the project indicates that the conditions in which home-care workers work are at least as unpleasant as those in which gardeners work. One of the most frequently reported tasks by home-care workers was cleaning blood/faeces/urine and vomit.

### *Translation into the new award*

Translation from the old award to the new restructured award is supposed to be based on new position descriptions drawn up in consultation with workers

presently in these positions. In practice, translation is occurring from base rate to base rate. This has direct implications for the community service workers, the lowest paid under the old award as it maintains many of the old relativities. For example, at most councils, assistant gardeners will translate into higher band levels than will the general home-care workers who have been placed in the same band because under the old award assistant gardeners were in fact paid at higher rates than the general home-care workers.

While many community service workers do not receive any overawards or allowances, over the last few years the MEU was able to achieve overawards for these workers in line with outdoor workers at several councils. At some other councils smaller overawards have been paid to community service workers than are paid to outdoor workers. For those workers who receive such overawards, the absorption of overawards and allowances occurring under award restructuring will discriminate most against those who move from the lowest rates in the old award. That is, those whose work has been undervalued in the past will get more of their overawards absorbed. This is predominantly female community service workers because where they do get similar overawards, in the move from the old award base rates to the higher new award base rates, more will be absorbed. Where community service workers receive smaller overawards this effect is exacerbated and in many instances these workers will be left with no overawards. In contrast many outdoor workers will remain at similar pay rates to those under the old award and will thus get to keep more of their overawards and therefore earn more than those banded at the same level.

### *Funding arrangements*

Another, perhaps less visible, obstacle to pay equity for home-care workers is the funding arrangements for home-care service provision. Under these arrangements, it is the provision of home care to various client groups, rather than the skills required to provide such care, that has been valued. For example, providing respite for the parents of disabled children is valued more highly than caring for the dementing elderly in that 100% funding is allocated to service providers in the first instance and only 80% funding in the latter.

In addition, in the definition of home-care tasks under funding guidelines which have become incorporated in the new classification structure, it is the provision of personal care (e.g. bathing a client) that is seen as more skilled work than the provision of personal assistance (e.g. managing a client's banking and bills) or the provision of environmental and household maintenance (e.g. maintaining an appropriate hygienic and safe living environment for a variety

of clients with a variety of needs). It would appear that the closer the worker gets actually to touching a client, the more skilled they become! Such definitions mitigate against any real evaluation of the actual work value of home-care work.

The funding under the HACC (Home and Community Care) program appears to be becoming more and more tightly targeted. This means that home-care workers work with clients in more difficult situations, take on more responsibilities, do work requiring more complex skills, which neither local government, the state government nor the federal government are prepared to recognise because of the cost implications. In many ways this reflects the resistance of government at all levels as employers to pay equity because they are dependant on women as a cheap source of labour despite the fact that there may be acceptance at the policy level of the social desirability of pay equity for women (see Felicity Rafferty 1991, p. 7 in this regard).

## References

- Rafferty, F. (1991), 'Pay equity: An industrial relations anomaly?', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol.33, no.1, pp.3-19.

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# SKILL AND SKILL FORMATION FOR WOMEN WORKERS: A CASE STUDY OF THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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SUE HARPER

*Professional Service—with a Smile: Recognising and Tapping the Skills of Women Workers in the Hospitality Industry* represents the findings of a project conducted in 1990, by the Women's Employment Branch of the Department of Labour in the hospitality industry.

## Background

The project aimed to assist the hospitality industry to provide access for women workers to a variety of career paths under the new award and to ensure that the education and training system being developed would cater for the training needs of women workers. The project was undertaken in a large club establishment, because of the range of services and facilities provided. This ensured that the project involved a wide variety of job categories found within the industry, and the information collected and recommendations made were relevant to the industry as a whole. Information for the project was collected from structured interviews with employees from eleven different job categories, supervisors and management. I will briefly outline our findings in relation to: the skills held by workers; the new industry training arrangements; and implementation at the enterprise level.

## Skills held by men and women at the enterprise level

An important component of the award restructuring process is the opportunity to identify, recognise and value all the skills employees possess and use as part

of their job. This is of particular importance for women workers in the hospitality industry as the type of work they have traditionally performed has been viewed as being 'unskilled' or 'semi-skilled', or not recognised at all. Recognition and valuation of the skills used by workers in the hospitality industry has traditionally been determined on the basis of:

- the manner in which skills have been acquired i.e. formal training, in-house training, job experience and life experience; and
- current hierarchies of skill, which value technical skills higher than interpersonal and organisational skills.

Information collected for this project found that employees and supervisors in all job categories use as part of their job a broad range of interpersonal, technical and organisational skills, e.g. patience, initiative, the ability to work in a team, and maintain quality standards. Employees and supervisors in all job categories reported that they acquired their skills largely by a combination of on-the-job experience and life experience; only cooks recorded any significant incidence of skills gained through formal, external training. The jobs in which women workers are concentrated, such as kitchenhands and room attendants, indicate that women largely gain their skills informally, either on-the-job or through life experience.

The findings of the project clearly show employees possess, and use as part of their job, a wide range of skills which have traditionally been unrecognised and undervalued. It argues that if women are to benefit from award restructuring then all skills need to be recognised and valued on the basis of their contribution to service delivery, not on the basis of how they were acquired or outdated notions of skill hierarchies.

## The new classification structure

The Industrial Relations Commission in its Structural Efficiency Principle set as one of the key aims of award restructuring, the establishment of skill-related career paths. To satisfy this requirement a new classification structure for the Hotels, Resorts and Hospitality Industry Award has been developed. It contains four general streams and specifies the tasks and responsibilities required at each level. The new classification structure was designed to address shortcomings of the previous awards in the industry, such as the lack of career paths and the scant recognition of diverse and complex skills. The new classification structure is essentially a mix of task descriptions and broad-based indicators of supervisory responsibility. When it is read in conjunction with the new training

guidelines and new skills assessment procedures, it should provide clear skills-related career paths.

The new skills assessment provisions have the potential to reduce the current concentration of women at the lower levels of the classification structure. They should provide an opportunity for women workers to certify their previously unrecognised skills. The extent to which the new arrangements will deliver improved opportunities for women will depend largely on employer interpretation and implementation of the new provisions, and an improved perception by women workers of their own abilities and skills. The findings of the project show that the new classification structure and complementary training arrangements identify and recognise the range of skills held by employees. However, an important further step will be an objective valuation of these skills to determine appropriate and equitable rates of pay for the grades specified in the classification structure, both within hospitality industry awards and across other industries.

## **New training arrangements and barriers to training**

The new training arrangements in the industry are innovative, particularly the move towards competency-based training and assessment and modularised training programs. These changes provide a unique opportunity to address some of the barriers to training experienced by women workers. The design of and access to formal and in-house training in the hospitality industry plays a crucial role in limiting women's opportunities to make the transition from low-paid and low-status jobs to more highly paid and skilled positions. While acknowledging that the new training arrangements provide greater flexibility in the delivery of training which will benefit women workers, the report identifies barriers which still remain. They include lack of knowledge about available training, literacy and numeracy problems, a need for bridging courses, inconvenient course times, distance to travel/lack of transport, domestic and family responsibilities and lack of child-care.

## **Career opportunities at the enterprise level**

The award restructuring process does not end with macro-level industry-wide changes to the award and training arrangements. Workplace and enterprise reform is critical to the implementation of the changes and realisation of



benefits for both organisations and their employees. In the course of collecting information for this project a number of enterprise-based issues were raised by employees, supervisors and managers.

The women employees identified a variety of obstacles to promotion which impede their career opportunities such as: lack of educational qualifications, skills, training and experience, domestic and child-care responsibilities, lack of knowledge about how promotions are made, the cost of training, and the attitudes of managers and supervisors. The findings of the study confirm that a change in work organisation will be crucial to achieving a positive result for women from award restructuring. Current work organisation within the industry prohibits the utilisation of the breadth of skills available, reinforces gender segmentations, prevents skill acquisition and undermines career opportunities. The importance of managing any change through communication and consultation within an enterprise was identified as another key issue.

## Conclusion

Our report includes a series of recommendations relevant to the new award, training arrangements and implementation at the enterprise level. It argues that unless further changes are made, the industry will continue to under-utilise its greatest resource—the people who work in it, and women will continue to occupy low-paid, low-status jobs.

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# TRAINING FOR THE COMPUTERISED OFFICE: CRISIS OR OPPORTUNITY?

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ROSEMARY J. HARRIS

The first part of this paper is based on one I wrote as part of my postgraduate studies in Continuing Education with the University of New England. It is informed by my long experience as a typist/secretarial office worker, my involvement in the Women's Movement over the past decade, a Masters degree in Women's Studies completed in 1984, and by the copious quantities of learning I have done as a mature-age student in my lifetime.

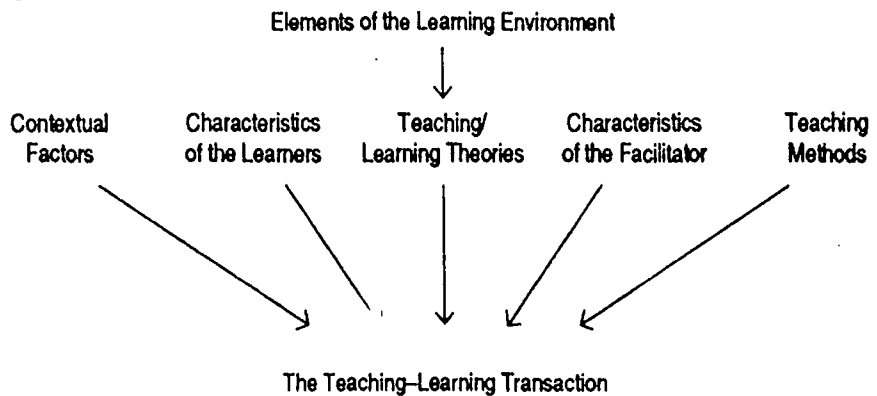
Like so many other women (albeit for different reasons), I sought to return to the full-time workforce after a lengthy break doing other things. The first thing that I noticed when I looked at the job advertisements early in 1986 was that it is no longer sufficient (or perhaps even necessary) to be a competent typist to get work in an office. All the demands for 'typists' and typing skills had been replaced by a demand for 'word processor operators' and knowledge of a variety of computers and programs which had not been dreamed of when I was at business college in the 1950s, nor even when I forsook office work late in the 1960s in order to travel and eventually to get for myself the university education which had been denied to me when I was young. (In my family, the two boys were sent to high school and university whilst the three girls were sent to a technical school and then pushed into the workforce before we turned fifteen.)

I persuaded the Commonwealth Employment Service that a woman in her forties with my background had no hope of getting a job unless she retrained on computers, so they sponsored me to do a course at a private college in the city. I finally wormed my way back into the permanent full-time workforce as a Word Processing Supervisor in the Public Service in April last year, a few months after commencing my degree in Continuing Education at UNE. Since my duties included learning the resident word processing program and training other staff in its use, and considering my own experience of the impact of technological change on typists' jobs, I sought to bend all my adult education studies towards the problem of assisting women, especially mature-aged and

experienced typists, to cope with the new computer technology which had invaded their workplace.

Therefore, I proposed to write a paper on 'methods of teaching computerised word processing operations to adult typists already working in an office situation'. It never happened. All my preliminary investigations in search of what might already have been said about the training task in such a situation turned up absolutely nothing. Not a single word. I found plenty of books about the impact of computer technology on the economy, the labour market, and human lifestyle at large; a proliferation of papers on sex differentials in ability and access to computer, maths and science education for school children; and reference in some government reports to the economic and social impacts of new office technology in Australia. But at the coalface of technological change in office work, where an almost totally female labour force is constantly being faced with the impact of computer technology on keyboard work, I found only a deep dark silence about what this means to the workers in the way of training needs, new skills acquisition and overall education needs to enable them to cope with a new technology which impinges so closely upon their everyday lives. I looked at Ralph Clark's *Elements of the Learning Environment* as shown in Figure 1 and realised that I could not even *begin* to write about methods of training typists in the office environment without first taking into account that the overwhelming characteristic of typists is that they are of one sex—female—and that women are invariably to be found clustered in a narrow range of low-grade, low-paid occupations in the Australian workforce. The attendant implication is that women's work is unskilled and therefore needs very little in the way of education or training.

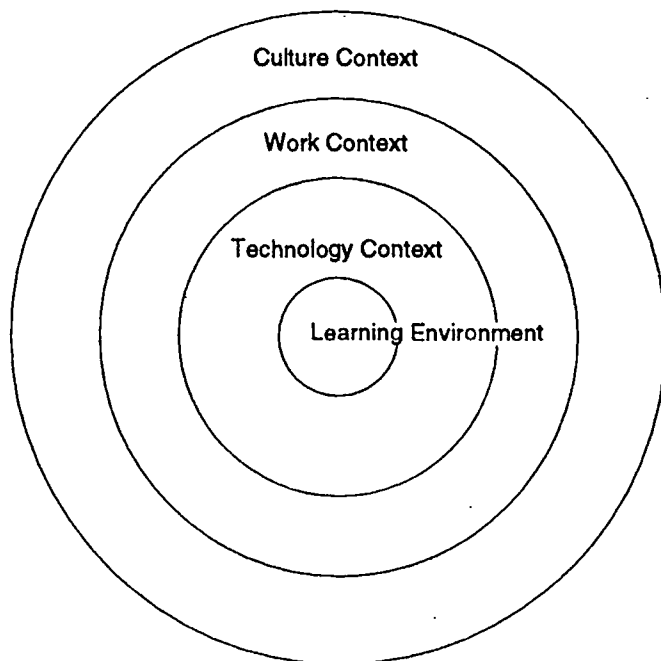
Figure 1



(Source: Clark 1988)

Before I could look at the learning environment for typists in the office, then, I had to place this in the wider contexts illustrated in Figure 2, where I show the office learning environment as embedded within the technology and work contexts which are closest to the actual training situation, but all surrounded again by the context of culture which permeates all else and must undoubtedly have strong modifying effects upon the learning environment at the central point of retraining for typists. I am not going to deal with the broad cultural context here. Moreover, the past few decades have witnessed a proliferation of research and writing about women's second-rate and subordinate position in a Western capitalist, patriarchal society such as we have in Australia. Some of the implications of this for women's education are detailed in Professor Eileen Byrne's *Women and Education* (1978), written when she was Education Officer to the Equal Opportunities Commission in England, and in *Invisible Women: The Schooling Scandal* (1982) by Australian writer Dale Spender.

**Figure 2** Contexts affecting the learning environment of typists learning word processing in the office



Many writers in recent times have written about the dichotomous spheres of labour and influence marked out for men and women in Western culture which are, respectively: public/private, rational/natural, productive/con-

sumerist, work/non-work, paid/unpaid, and skilled/unskilled. In this schema, women's 'work' is 'naturally' in the private domain, unpaid and unskilled. Among the narrow range of paid occupations in which women do dominate, it is probably the typing/clerical/secretarial occupation which has been most closely modelled upon women's prime gender role in wider society—the role of wife, nurturer and domestic servant to men. In the office, men manage and women perform support tasks and women's tasks are invariably low-paid, regardless of the experience or skills required to carry them out.

Extensive research done by Rosabeth Moss Kanter in America showed conclusively that a secretary's job skills, for instance, were largely irrelevant to her promotional opportunities since it was her *personal* relationship with her boss which made her a good secretary. Kanter found that bosses preferred to judge secretaries on 'attitudes' rather than on the 'job objectives' applied to all higher ranked personnel, and that two central traits were favoured for secretaries: 'initiative and enthusiasm' and 'personal service orientation'.

... analysis showed that where variants of these traits were found, the secretary was generally rated high on most other abilities, including basic skills like typing. ... where managers commented on their absence, secretaries tended to be rated low on basic skills, too. (Kanter 1977, p. 86)

In their book about *Gender at Work* (1983), Sydney writers Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle propose that two of the main precepts which have determined women's condition in the workforce are:

- that women have been regarded as invaders of the workforce; and
- women's skills have been denied.

What they say about 'skill' has particular relevance to the retraining needs of typists, since it is obvious that training will not be given if something is not seen as a skill. They write:

The definition of skill is gender biased. The process by which some jobs are defined as skilled and others as unskilled is complex, but by and large women's 'skills' are not recognised as such in the definitions of their jobs.

Every occupation requires skill. Even in shovelling dirt or digging trenches, there is an enormous difference between the expert and the novice. Women in office work were denied their skill. We paid for training at business college where a good standard of spelling and grammar was required to learn typing and shorthand. When we worked in an office, every male was superior to us even if they had received no training. (Game & Pringle 1983, p. 8)

The recent study done by Barbara Pocock and summarised in her book, *Demanding Skill: Women and Technical Education in Australia* (1988) shows clearly that very little has advanced in women's vocational education since I was taught cooking, laundry, dressmaking and millinery at a technical school and my parents paid for me to learn typing, shorthand and business practice at a private college before pushing me into the office workforce, whereafter my education abruptly ceased.

Pocock points out that, in contrast to trade apprenticeship education for males in which boys can begin to earn money as a contracted employee at the same time as they learn their trade in part-time studies provided by government-funded colleges, most vocational education for girls is completed, full-time, in private colleges, prior to gaining employment (pp. 26-7). Other studies show that females in the workforce are far less likely to be sent on training courses, or funded for promotional training, by their employers.

When I went to business college in 1958, training for promotional opportunities consisted in a special lecture on personal deportment. I mostly remember a strict injunction not to wear jangly jewellery. When I retrained on computers some thirty years later, the college principal constantly adjured us to colour coordinate our clothing and a woman came in from the local modelling agency to show us how to walk in and out of a door and sit down gracefully. When I began work in an insurance office in the 1950s, the 'office wife' connection was quite clear, even at the entrance level. One female typist was allocated to each male clerk. The male and female were of comparable age and educational achievement. The male was boss of the female. The male was being trained for a career in the insurance business; the female was there to do his typing. She was not being trained for anything. When I re-entered the full-time work force last year, all the word processor operators, doing precise and complicated work on computers, were women on the bottom salary level; while all the permanent clerical staff feeding the work to them (often so inaccurately drafted that the women had to correct the content as they typed) were males on a salary level two grades higher.

It was in this job that I became aware of how completely a typist's technical skills, and therefore her training needs, are denied. When I first enquired about the job and the computer system in use, I was told that:

- Nobody in there knew the system and they were hoping for the advertised person to come in and sort the mess out for them.
- Certainly I would be given training on the system; they would not expect me to come in and start using it without training.

What actually happened was quite different.

The only 'training' I was offered was for one of the typists to show me how the particular documents were set out and manipulated on the screen—and by this I mean a sort of rote instruction in the manner of: 'Do an F4 here... now press Stopcode'. Outside training from the manufacturers was out of the question because it cost too much. A senior secretary was refused even reimbursement of TAFE college fees so she could study word processing in her own time at night, and time off during the day to learn the new system before using it seemed not to come into consideration at all. What is more, I had barely found my way to the ladies loo in my new job before the Office Manager was demanding to know when I would begin teaching others. She seemed to suspect that I held some undesirably educational ideas because this is what she told me about the training I should do: 'This is not a classroom, you know. All we want to do is get them productive as quickly as possible. They should be proficient on the documents within two days, or four at the most. You don't have to show them anything else. They don't need to know anything else'.

Notwithstanding all this, and because I understood it as my duty to become more efficient than anyone else in the word processing program (as distinct from the local document layout) so that I could train and troubleshoot for anyone in the entire division, I insisted on first taking the time to learn all the functions of the word processor itself. I discovered that there was an excellent on-screen tutorial package available which I simply had to log on to as a student. I stopped other (more 'productive'!?) activities while I spent some twenty hours completing this tutorial package. To me, this was an absolutely essential self-education process to complete before attempting to teach and assist other WP operators but my bosses apparently saw it as an aggressive and defiant act. Within two weeks, I was transferred to a copy typing position for 50% of my time. When I continued to train and *educate* other staff nonetheless, my training position was abolished. At the end of six months, the bosses used the probation report to recommend annulment of my appointment to the Public Service. In other words, I got the sack.

It is a well-established fact that any competent and confident woman in the workplace is likely to be branded 'loud', 'aggressive', 'arrogant' and other epithets of the kind. My examination of the technological context of typists' work reveals how I doubly sinned in attempting to teach typists true computer skills: typing is women's work, but technology is male!

In a book about 'feminist perspectives on technology', American writer Joan Rothschild relates how she scoured through the literature on technology and found women to be virtually invisible. She concluded that this could not be explained away as merely linguistic use of the 'generic male', as might be claimed for the following extract:

the roots of the machine's genealogical tree is in the brain of this conceptual man ... after all it was he who made the machine. (Usher quoted in Rothschild 1983, p. 164)

but that:

the reason is the *literal identification of the male with technology* ... For most scholars and writers in the technology field, the prototype—the inventor, the user, the thinker about and reactor to technology—is male. (Rothschild 1983, pp. xviii–xix, my emphasis)

British researchers Bruce and Kirkup note that dictionary definitions of technology have no overt male bias, as in:

the scientific study of the practical or industrial arts (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1961)

but that, somehow, activities and artefacts associated with men are instinctively regarded as more 'technological' than others.

For example, food preparation and production are as much a technology in the domestic kitchen as in the factory but are unlikely to be seen as such, and word processor operation is as technical an activity as print setting. Where a technology is more associated with women, this technology is at best regarded as 'women's technology,' or not even as technology at all. (Bruce & Kirkup 1985, p. 41)

This supports my own observation that when a typist (female) begins to make use of computer technology (male) for word processing, *she is not viewed as using a computer at all!* It follows, according to this cultural (il)logic, that no particular training will be required by a typist who has to transfer her document production tasks from a typewriter to a computer. She will adapt to the new medium as 'naturally' and easily as women supposedly adapt to motherhood—without training or trauma.

After completion of my initial computer training in 1986, I was placed with a small private firm that had computerised its typing functions some six months before. In respect of computer operations, the office was in chaos. Three women—ranging from receptionist, through typist to senior secretary/office manager—had to use the computers for typing work. The computers were not used for anything else. The men never typed. Yet all the decisions and processes associated with purchase and use of the computers were mediated by men. Purchase of the computers to replace typewriters had been suggested and



carried out by a bright new boy from Sydney. The elderly boss/owner, who knew less than nothing about computers, complained pathetically to me that he could not understand why colleges could not just educate staff in how to use these things. He did not understand that, in his ignorance and attempts to cut costs, he had purchased an obscure word processing package that no college had ever heard of before. The senior woman described to me what happened when the computers were introduced. Without consultation or preparation, the typewriter was lifted from her desk and a computer terminal put in its place. A woman from the computer firm gave some instruction on how to create and edit a document. Bright Young Man hung over Senior Typist's shoulder and appropriated the training to himself. When the trainer went home, Senior Woman was left floundering in the middle of a complex 12-page document which she was expected to get finished before the afternoon mail, just as if nothing had intervened to upset her normal routine. When I arrived, morale was at an all-time low and the senior woman had come close to nervous collapse. She was never given further training or time off from her normal work load to spend in learning the new system of document production. She complained bitterly to me that she had taught the juniors 'all they know' but the boss now favoured them over her because their inaccurate typing and poor layout no longer mattered now that it could be easily corrected by the computer.

Just about every book or report that touches on the subject of computer technology agrees unhesitatingly on one point—that the office workforce, and women in particular, are most affected. Seventy per cent of paid women have jobs in offices (Technological Change Committee of the Australian Science and Technology Council 1986) and only 2.6% of those women are in administrative or managerial areas whilst the low-status keyboard workforce is almost entirely female. The Australian Public Service recorded that its keyboard staff was over 99% female and 'there were no male personal secretaries or word processing typists' as at December 1982 (PSB 1984). The Committee of Inquiry into Technological Change in Australia in 1980 concluded that women must bear 'the larger burden of adjustment to technological change'.

When a particular area of industry and a large and precisely identifiable group of workers are being significantly affected by technological change, one might expect that industry and government would combine in a concerted effort to ensure that education and training would be directed accordingly in order to ensure that skilled workers would be qualified to fill the changing and different jobs becoming available in the foreseeable future. This is far from happening with women's office work. TAFE colleges have added several word processing courses to their traditional secretarial studies programs and a variety of WP and Computer Awareness type courses to their Continuing

Education programs. Private colleges in the cities make a mint out of crash 2-day and 20-hour courses in specific word processing applications. In the United Kingdom (much more than in Australia, as far as I can see) there are adult and community educators struggling to compose courses which will increase understanding of computer technology in the community at large, and some few have addressed themselves specifically to the problems women face in this respect. Yet, by any definition of computer literacy, the typists who take up word processing on computers in the office situation—who basically have a computer put in front of them and are told, 'Here, type on it'—are not even minimally literate in the medium they are required to use.

Bostock and Seifert, two British writers who have done a lot of research into computers and adult education, including a study of 'The effects of learning environment and gender on the attainment of computer literacy' have offered these samples from the literature of what 'computer literacy' is:

First, computer literacy should mean being able to recognise in a general way both the usefulness and the limitations of computers. Secondly, someone who is computer literate should be able to learn readily how to use computer programs. Thirdly, being computer literate means being sufficiently aware of the ways in which computers are being used and can be used, so that one can make reasonably informed judgements about their services. (Gerver 1984, pp. 63-4)

A computer literate student should: understand what computer systems are; use computer language; operate a microcomputer in a work related situation; appreciate what a program is and why it works; be aware of applications of computing in commerce, industry and other settings; be aware of current trends in Information Technology and its social implications. (FEU 1983, p. 4)

Computer literacy is simply the fundamental knowledge of how computers work and the ability to read, write and analyze simple programs. (Starr 1982).

(quoted in Bostock & Seifert 1986)

Again I propose: virtually nobody currently employed in the Australian workforce specifically to type documents on a computer is even computer literate, *nor is it the intention of any on-the-job or vocational training she may be given that she should become so.* In my paper on the learning environment for office typists I came to the dismal conclusion that there is no 'learning' environment in the office to retrain women from being typists to computer users. They are shown how to type a specific kind of document on a specific kind of word processor. That is all and *that* is the crisis—and I suggest that unless adult,

community and vocational educators take the thought to provide something better, they too are colluding in creating the crisis.

The review of new office technology done by the Australian Science and Technology Council (Technological Change Committee 1986) points out that 'changes in job skills have implications for training' and that the present tendency 'to lock women into narrow occupations which rely upon proficiency in the usage of particular word processing systems' limits their career opportunities and under-utilises human resources. The review also points out that new office technology can be implemented in two ways—as a machine or as a tool. If technology is implemented as a *machine* 'tasks become increasingly trivialised and deskilled' but if technology is implemented as a tool, which is 'an extension of human capabilities and subservient to the human being', then the worker will gain greater job satisfaction and new opportunities to learn and grow (p. 61).

I subtitled my paper 'Crisis or opportunity?' because there is opportunity to do something about the crisis situation for adult typists which I have outlined. In the Australian Public Service (APS), at least, winds of change are indeed blowing—and typists' compensation claims for Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) due to office computerisation were largely responsible for initiation of the biggest restructuring exercise that the APS has undergone in fifty years. Integral to this restructuring is the abolition of typing positions as such and the proposed 'multi-skilling' of all staff. Whether this effectively becomes multi-skilling for women and men equally or merely a multi-*deskilling* of selected areas in which women have predominated remains to be seen. I personally am deeply concerned that the advent of office computerisation is causing women's document production skills—of which keyboard dexterity is only a portion—to pass from undervalued to invisible. The problem is that not only is nearly every typist doing word processing a computer illiterate—so is nearly every manager who tells typists what to do! Very few of the office managers who hire and fire typists, evaluate their skills and performance, and encourage or deny their training and promotion opportunities, have any idea themselves of what skills are required for competent word processing operations or most effective use of the highly technical equipment typists now use.

I believe that adult and community educators as well as the government, unions, industry leaders and women involved, should be concerned about this situation. As people who recognise the need for ongoing education throughout an individual's life and who believe in the right to be educated for life not just trained to labour, it rests with us as much as anyone to propose and promote the kind of education which will equip all workers, and indeed all adults, to cope with the technological changes which are revolutionising both our work and our way of life in Australia today.

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# THE IDEOLOGY OF SKILL AND GENDER: A SELECTIVE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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CATHY EMERY

The emergence of 'skill' as a central concern in public policy in the last decade leaves little doubt that notions of skill, skilled work and skill formation have become highly politicised. The issues encompassing skill have been placed firmly on the agendas of the industrial parties, impacting on our approaches to education and training, and industrial relations. This paper reviews the literature that will inform a research project concerned with the ways in which perceptions of skill are currently constructed and the implications this has for women. The research project draws on the view that notions of skill are socially constructed, and that this construction is gendered in a way which disadvantages women.

Starting with a brief look at the place of skill in current discourse, the review turns to look at how skill is treated in the different research paradigms, with a focus on the arguments central to the social constructionist perspective. It covers literature dealing with the dynamics of the ideology of skill definition and value, exploring the key processes underlying this which emerge in the literature from the technology and skill debate, the comparable worth and pay equity material, and training. Finally, the implications of a gendered construction of skill are explored in relation to the current issues of award restructuring and enterprise bargaining.

## The current focus on skill

The recent explosion of interest in 'skilling' issues has generally been traced to economic and political changes occurring over the last decade. The idea that skills and a skilled workforce are the key to economic prosperity in the changing global market economy has been accepted by many commentators (e.g. Payne

1991, p. 1; Mathews 1989, p. 128) and, more importantly, embraced by the industrial parties (MacDermott, forthcoming, p. 2). In this way, debates about new technologies, work organisation and changes in industrial relations to meet the challenges posed by economic and political change have been central to the emergence of a high profile for skilling issues (Jackson 1991b, p. 9; Jackson 1989, p. 14).

The focus on skills has become embodied in a range of public policy documents, and been interpreted in both the industrial and educational arenas. As Windsor (1991, p. 1) suggests, the Industrial Relations Commission's (IRC's) Structural Efficiency Principle (SEP) decision in 1988 played a key role in placing skills on the negotiating agenda. The importance of skill, then, takes on an industrial relations flavour, resulting in what has been described as a convergence of the educational and industrial concepts of skill (Junor 1988, p. 137; MacDermott, forthcoming, p. 1).

Throughout the literature, much is made of this context of the interest in skill. For example, Jackson (1989, p. 14) highlights the problem of different and conflicting interests involved in the politicisation of skill. A related issue is the increasingly overt emphasis on skill being linked to wages, career structures, work organisation, job satisfaction and power in the workplace (e.g. McCreadie 1991, p. 34). This has major implications for workers denied access to training or recognition of their skills, particularly women. The way skill is defined and valued has a new significance (e.g. MacDermott, forthcoming, p. 1; Steinberg 1990, p. 452; Cox & Leonard 1991, pp. 20-1).

## Theories of skill

The way skill is treated by the different research traditions is covered in articles by Attewell (1990), Vallas (1990) and Spenner (1990). Together, these articles are an excellent guide to the view of skill adopted, the research interests and the explanations for major issues arising from each of the paradigms.

The positivist approach to skill is based on the assumption that skill is an objective, one-dimensional entity, capable of quantitative measurement (Attewell 1990, p. 423; Spenner 1990, p. 402). Research interest ranges from measuring the skills of people (i.e. human capital studies) to measuring the skills of jobs, based on relative complexity (Attewell 1990, pp. 424-6).

Although positivist research has been deftly criticised on a number of points (e.g. Vallas 1990, p. 384), it has been argued that it is this approach which underlies conventional views of women and skills. Positivist measures define skill on purely technical factors (Bennett 1984, p. 118), which overlooks many

of the skills women bring to the workplace. At the same time, measuring the level of skill in jobs based on task complexity, and the skills of people by the level of education and experience they bring to the workplace, characterises the work of women as fundamentally unskilled. The gendered nature of work can be explained by factors external to the labour process. The wages gap and gender segregation are seen as the result of either the low skill levels held by women, or the lower skill requirements of the work they do (Bennett 1984, p. 118; Steinberg 1990, p. 450).

The positivist assumption that skills are amenable to objective observation and measurement based on complexity is rejected in ethnomethodological research. In this approach, the definition of work as skilled or unskilled is linked to social perceptions about the skills employed. Widely shared skills are systematically devalued, and work labelled unskilled once it can be done well (Attewell 1990, pp. 430-4).

A third major approach to the study of skill is that developed by neo-Weberian or social constructionist theory. Research in this tradition is concerned with the ways in which social, political, economic and ideological processes contribute to the definition and value of skill. Skill labels reflect these processes 'quite apart from the demands of the task' (Vallas 1990, p. 390). The Weberian notion of 'social closure' is central to this approach, where 'skilled' work is defined and defended on the basis of exclusionary practices (Attewell 1990, p. 436).

Drawing on this approach, a feminist perspective on the social construction of skill has emerged. Here it is argued that skill is constructed as a process of interaction, and is defined and organised through broader social processes (Jackson 1991b, p. 17), and that these processes are fundamentally gendered (Steinberg 1990, p. 453). This view places particular emphasis on the gender relations inherent in the definition of types of work and occupations as 'skilled', and of various skills as valued.

Within this perspective, a range of views have emerged placing different emphasis on the processes involved. The key areas of debate include:

- The relative importance of gender/class relations

Most analyses in this perspective link the definition of skill to both gender and class relations (e.g. Pocock 1988, p. 11; Jackson 1991b; Gaskell 1987, p. 141; Jenson 1989, p. 147), while others are critical of an overemphasis on gender relations at the expense of class (West 1990, p. 267).

- The degree of 'social' processes in the construction of skill labels

A number of views emerge here. Phillips and Taylor (1980, p. 79) argue

that skill labels are often assigned 'by virtue of the sex and power of the workers who perform it'. Others have suggested while skill labels are socially defined, feminist theory should not ignore the material component of skill (Wajcman 1991, p. 38; West 1990, p. 267), real differences in skill levels related to job design (Rainbird 1988, p. 176), or real differences in levels of complexity and autonomy (Steinberg 1990, p. 454).

- The origins of processes involved

The debate here centres on the importance of the workplace in constructing skill definitions. The social constructionist view provides powerful evidence that the workplace is central to the gendering of skill labels (e.g. Jackson 1991b, pp. 20-4; Acker 1990, pp. 59-64), and is not based purely on factors external to the labour market (Bennett 1984, p. 118). The importance of socialisation is implicit in this view, but considered overrated by some (e.g. Baldcock's criticism of O'Donnell & Hall 1990, p. 46) and underrated by others (e.g. West 1990, p. 267).

Within this perspective, however, the literature indicates that there is substantial agreement that skill is constructed as part of the broader social/political power play (Jackson 1991b, p. 11) which is influenced by historic practices and values, and which is gendered.

## The ideology of skill

Throughout the literature, reference is made to the gendered ideology of skill. Skill is ideological both in the way it is constructed and in its purpose. It is ideological in the sense that it creates and perpetuates differences between men and women, and defines and values women as inferior (Reskin 1988, p. 58). It serves to organise relations and is used to protect those in power (Jackson 1991b, p. 9). The ideology of skill draws on historical relations of power and control (Pocock 1988, p. 14) and is reconstructed over time (Reskin 1988, p. 50).

Important in the ideology of skill is the process of differentiation (Jackson 1991b, p. 9; Jenson 1989, p. 146), and contest (Junor 1988, p. 137). Jenson (1989, p. 149) highlights differentiation centred on the notion that the work of men is 'skilled', while the work of women is based on natural attributes.

MacDermott (1990, pp. 61-70) traces this process to nineteenth-century notions of complementarity (moral/immoral, public/private and so on), which has served to control the definition and value of skills. The current ideology of skill is redefined to support the male skill paradigm as public, objective and



paid. The work and skills of women, linked to their basis in the private, subjective and unpaid realms, are rendered invisible in this paradigm, and incapable of valuation in job evaluation terms (MacDermott 1990, p. 70). The natural talents of women, defined through this process, also have implications for gender segregation at work—women are more suited to the work of caring (MacDermott, forthcoming, pp. 14–15), which, in the current ideology of skill, involves skills which are invisible and therefore not rewarded. The ideology of skill presented in this work provides a powerful framework considering issues of skills and gender in the current context.

A major theme in the literature is grappling with processes involved in the ideological construction of skill. Skill definitions are based on a complex interplay between power and context. Jackson (1991b, p. 13) argues that skill definitions 'depend(s) in part on who has the power to define, as well as on the circumstances a definition is meant to fit and the interests it is meant to serve'. For this reason, research on particular aspects of skill has revealed different political, social, organisational and educational processes at work in different contexts. The next section examines the issues emerging from research on technology and skill, pay equity and comparable worth, and training.

## Key research issues

### *Technology and skill*

The debate about the relationship between technology and skill has focused on the issues of skilling/deskilling and flexible specialisation.

The skilling/deskilling debate is concerned with the effects of technology and associated work organisation on the skill content of work. The deskilling perspective contends that the impact of new technology is associated with increasing routine in work based on narrow tasks, and subject to greater management control (Littler 1991, p. 17; Vallas 1990, p. 381). The work of women becomes increasingly dehumanised (Phillips & Taylor 1980, p. 83).

The 'skilling' perspective, by contrast, suggests that technology will eliminate routine work, and increase the overall skill content of work (Littler 1991, p. 17). This view also predicts that technology will facilitate changed work relations, based more on cooperation and teamwork than control (e.g. Mathews 1989, p. 128).

Recent research has revealed that the relationship between technology and skill content is more complex than these opposing views would suggest. For example, Appelbaum's study of the insurance business indicates that

technology and job redesign can have mixed results in the skill content of the work of women (Appelbaum 1987, pp. 189-97). Littler (1991, pp. 9,55-6) argues that the inconsistent findings in this debate are a reflection of the failure to consider change at a sectoral level, in relation to broader political and economic processes. The flexible specialisation debate, too, has failed to identify any firm trends (e.g. Walby 1989, pp. 127-36).

The social constructionist perspective approaches the issue of technology and skill from a different angle. It suggests that the impact of technology is not so much the effect it has on the skill content of work, but rather how it is used in the reconstruction of skill labels. This is often characterised by power plays drawing on definition by exclusion; and is gendered (Littler 1991, p. 18).

Cockburn's study of the printing industry has been influential in this view. Here, work organisation based on changes in technology is seen to be more a reflection of custom, defined over time through conflicting relations (including gender), than the inherent qualities of technology. Cultural factors, such as male camaraderie, competitiveness, and popular wisdom are used in the power play as technology is appropriated for male workers (Cockburn quoted in Jackson 1991b, p. 16; Wajcman 1991, p. 41; West 1990, p. 257). The definition of skill embodied in technology is both ideological and gendered (Wajcman 1991, pp. 36,37).

Other studies have focused on revealing the strategic choices involved in the use of technology at work. Jenson (1989, pp. 149-50) argues that gender relations with technology are socially created through machine design, the gender assumptions informing work assignment and ideas of femininity and technology. The assumptions about relative strength and so on underlying these choices are themselves the product of social relations (Jackson 1991b, pp. 13-14).

Wajcman (1991, pp. 40-1) argues that both choices about machine design and economic factors influence the gendering of skill in relation to technology. The economic processes at work are complex. Employers often choose new technologies to replace expensive male labour, but change will be slower in work where women predominate, as the cost benefits will take longer to materialise.

Another key factor in the power play for the definition of skill revealed through the literature on technology is the nature of skill recognition. 'Flexible' technology is said to demand less specialised skills, and greater decision making, prioritising and cooperative skills (e.g. Field 1990, p. 13). While the work of women has, in the past, been labelled as unskilled precisely because it was characterised this way, women have failed to gain recognition of these skills now that they are in demand (Baldcock 1990, p. 277; Cox & Leonard 1991,

pp. 29-31). This contradiction is part of the gendered construction of skill, based more on the process of control over occupation and wage rates, and the exertion of power and control than inherent qualities of work design or technology (Baldcock 1990, p. 276). The issue, then, is not the skill content of jobs dictated by technology, but rather the recognition and valuation of skills (Rainbird 1988, p. 179).

### *Pay equity and comparable worth*

The pay equity and comparable worth literature highlights the role of organisational structure, work design, language, symbols and documents in the workplace as they contribute to and reinforce skill definitions and rewards.

Much of the literature deals with the gender bias inherent in the job evaluation process, which informs the development of job descriptions and comparable worth claims. Bias is clearly linked to broader assumptions about the role of women, and the relative value of the skills used in much of the work of women.

Analysis of job evaluation processes reveals gender bias in the instruments used, i.e. identification of tasks, values of tasks and weighting factors (Steinberg 1990, pp. 459-65; Lander & O'Neill 1991, pp. 21-3). Much of the job content of the work of women is rendered invisible, e.g. concentration, protecting confidentiality, actual responsibility, and so on (Steinberg 1990, p. 460). The administration of job evaluation instruments is also a source of bias. Here the dynamics of the decision-makers is important. The culture of the organisation, sex of the incumbent, existing status and pay, and power of supervisors are reflected in decisions made (Burton 1991, p. 95; Burton, Hag & Thompson 1987, p. 48; Lander & O'Neill 1991, p. 25).

A related issue revealed in the literature is the nature of skills amenable to recognition using these processes. As MacDermott (1990, p. 70) suggests, the skills of women are rendered invisible in job evaluation systems. For example, the Hay system weights 'technical know how' seven times higher than 'human service skills' (Steinberg 1990, p. 465). Indeed, current skill definitions value the manual and technical skills held predominantly by men (even if this is socially constructed!) and undervalue the operational and social skills predominantly held by women (Labour Research Centre 1990, p. 57).

At the same time, the job evaluation process is also more likely to recognise skills based on accredited training or experience (Burton 1988, p. 5), which fails to acknowledge the skills women acquire at the workplace or in unpaid work, and reinforces discrimination based on unequal access to formal training (Cox & Leonard 1991, p. 1; MacDermott, forthcoming, p. 7). Finally, job

evaluation processes do not acknowledge the issue of women's failure to recognise and value their skills, regardless of where they are acquired (Cox & Leonard 1991, p. 5; Windsor 1991, p. 14).

The issue of the language of skills recognition and description has also been raised throughout this material. The invisibility and undervalued status of the skills and work of women is linked to the low level of detail and vagueness provided in job descriptions, and the different language used (Steinberg 1990, p. 460; Burton, Hag & Thompson 1987, p. 60). Descriptions of the work of men is linked to what they *do*; while the work of women is described by what they *have* (Burton 1991, p. 28), reinforcing and reflecting the ideology of the 'skills of men and talents of women'. As Poynton and Lazenby (1992, p. 1) argue, this mitigates against the true valuation of the skills of women in the industrial arena.

A second implication, identified by Jackson (1991b, pp. 23-4) is the process of job tunnelling which arises from the language of job descriptions. Job tunnelling occurs when descriptions do not recognise the actual responsibility involved in jobs, e.g. program knowledge is 'sheared' from accounts of the job. This operates to limit the promotional opportunities of incumbents and contributes to the invisibility of the skills of women.

Job descriptions also contribute to the gendering of organisational structures and relations (Acker 1990, p. 61). The value of jobs is linked to the values of management, assumptions about women's place in the full-time paid workforce, and the nature of organisational outcomes achieved in the work of women (Acker 1990, pp. 62-4). For example, Kenna argues that the low salaries of community services workers in local government is linked to the fact that they are not income generating, i.e. 'if quality of life was the indicator, community services work would be *the* local government service' (Kenna 1992, pp. 1,5). As Acker (1990, p. 59) argues, the value of skills as embodied in the language of job descriptions not only reflects the gendered logic of organisations, it also contributes to their production.

The issues revealed in this material indicate that there is no such thing as an 'objective' job (Burton 1991, p. 28), and that gender relations in the workplace play an important role in the construction of skill definitions and valuations. The systematic undervaluing of the skills and work of women is linked more to gender bias in work value systems (Labour Research Centre 1990, p. 57) than to any objective measure of skill. As Steinberg suggests, the literature 'reveals the gender biases embedded in skill definitions of job complexity and human capital characteristics', with the influence of historic customs, prejudices and ideologies far more influential than the nature of work performed (Steinberg 1990, pp. 453-4).

## *Training*

Industry training has clearly played an integral role in the gendered social construction of skill labels. Formal training has been used as a means for judging the presence of skill in work (Gaskell 1986, p. 364). It is generally acknowledged that women continue to lack access to formal training (Australia, Parliament, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1992, pp. 184–6); a reflection of the training structures, unequal costs of training, the power of men in setting training agendas and barriers in the training environment (Pocock 1989, pp. 43–4). Instead, women are more likely to gain their (unrecognised) skills through experience in paid and unpaid work, or from informal training at work (Kenna 1992, p. 73; Cox & Leonard 1991, p. 2).

The literature highlights the importance of the apprenticeship system, supported by the male-dominated craft unions, as a mechanism for controlling the supply of workers, the value of work, and for excluding women (e.g. MacDermott, forthcoming, p. 13; Gaskell 1986, p. 370). The role of industry training in controlling the supply of 'skilled' workers, which has been restricted in the female-dominated occupations, can be seen as part of economic and ideological processes. MacDermott (forthcoming, pp. 13–15) argues that women have been denied access to craft-based occupations for economic and moral reasons, as well as the power of the ideology of the 'natural' attributes of women. As Jackson (1988, p. 10) notes, it is ironic that women are finally gaining access to the apprenticeship system at a time when the work it covers is contracting.

The relationship between training and skill, however, is seen not just as an issue of access or 'how much', but also of 'what counts'. Training is not neutral; it is integral to the social-political power play in the gendered construction of skill (Jackson 1991b, p. 27). For example, Bennett (1984, p. 130) argues that the apprenticeship system was not intrinsically different from other forms of training, but that its power in determining work value lay in its ideological and institutional characteristics. 'What counts' as training is often linked to the power of unions to claim it as such, and the inability of management to recognise particular forms of training, both of which have disadvantaged women (Jackson 1991b, p. 27).

The definition of what counts as training has come under scrutiny as the implications of current changes to the training system are explored. A new focus on workplace-based training may facilitate recognition in an area where women have traditionally received much of their training (Pocock 1989, p. 45). It is, however, argued that these arrangements may further disadvantage

women in the unpaid workforce, and that management's selection of workers for training may reflect traditional notions of the unskilled nature of the work of women (Pocock 1989, p. 45; Junor 1989, p. 8). Men still have greater access to recognised on-the-job training than women (Australia, Parliament, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1992, p. 186). At the same time, current Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) arrangements, a key feature of the new framework for the recognition of training, rarely recognise skill acquired through life experience or unpaid work (Broadmeadows College of TAFE 1992, pp. 17-23).

It appears that change brought about by transforming the training system continues to be impeded by historic perceptions of skilled work and training needs (MacDermott, forthcoming, p. 20). Training has not lost its central place in the political battlefield over controlling 'who knows what' (Jackson 1991b, p. 30). The next section explores the impact of a gendered construction of skill labels in relation to the current issues of award restructuring and enterprise bargaining.

## Award restructuring

The IRC's SEP decisions in 1988 and 1989 clearly linked wage rises to efficiency gains achieved to changes in industrial awards. Awards would identify skills-based career paths to foster participation in skill formation, facilitate multi-skilling and broadbanding and remove discriminatory provisions in awards (Beaton 1989, pp. 11-17). The promise for women workers encompassed in these decisions is well documented. Award restructuring provided opportunities for the recognition and accreditation of previously unacknowledged skills, access to skills-related career paths, access to training, the development of portable skills and the redesign of jobs to break down sex stereotyping (McCreadie 1991, p. 34) which has been so influential in the construction of skill labels.

At the same time, a range of issues have been identified which mitigate against the fulfilment of this promise. These include:

- The drive for change has come from male-dominated tradeable goods sectors, ignoring the economic contribution made in the predominantly female services sectors (McCreadie 1989, p. 12). This may impact on patterns of investment in training (Junor 1988, p. 7).
- The powerful male unions have 'hijacked' the agenda, i.e. the metals model has questionable relevance in areas of work where women

predominate (McCreadie 1989, p. 12). For example, much of the work of women is already multi-skilled and based on cooperate work practices (McCreadie 1991, p. 34; Pocock 1989, pp. 44-5). Not only is there a need to 'unpack' the work of women into more, not less, classifications (Windsor 1991, p. 4), but workers in these areas must look to other 'efficiency' gains to get pay rises.

- The need to overcome barriers to training has become more urgent (McCreadie 1991, p. 34).
- New arrangements may foster a focus on industry-specific training, which disadvantages many women workers in occupations cutting across industries, e.g. clerical workers. This effects the portability of skills accredited (MacDermott, forthcoming, p. 23).
- Much of the promise of change through award restructuring is lost if jobs are not redesigned (Snelling 1990, p. 14; McCreadie 1989, p. 14).

The problem most clearly identified in the literature, however, is the major issue of tackling how skill is defined and valued (e.g. Hall 1989, p. 15; Ellison, Hunt & MacDermott 1990, pp. 7-8). As the Pay Equity Coalition argued 'how "skill" is defined ... will determine which groups of workers benefit from any award restructuring and which workers don't' (quoted in Junor 1988, p. 5).

In a review of women in restructured awards, Ellison, Hunt and MacDermott (1990, pp. 10-11) found that progress has been uneven. They found some examples where award restructuring has placed an emphasis on achieving pro-rata conditions, training and career paths for part-time workers. At the same time, they identify some cases where conditions 'traded off' in award restructuring have particularly disadvantaged women. Baldcock, too, reports cases where change has exacerbated gender segregation, devalued existing specialist skills, decreased opportunities for enhancement, or generated a contingent workforce, with minimal access to training and career paths (Baldcock 1990, pp. 47-9). While the overall benefits of award restructuring are yet to be realised, the impact of enterprise bargaining is now being addressed.

## Enterprise bargaining

The Enterprise Bargaining Principle handed down in the October 1991 national wage case creates a new climate for considering the gendered construction of skill labels. The decision was supported by the tripartite industry parties (Scutt 1991, p. 34), largely in order to speed up the award restructuring process (MacDermott, forthcoming, p. 24).

The potential benefits for women workers have been identified as the opportunity for increasing flexibility of working hours (McCreadie 1991, p. 34) and the need for unions to treat workers less as a homogeneous group, and cater more to their diverse needs (Gray 1990, p. 17). Enterprise bargaining could provide the impetus for unions to tackle issues of child-care, job sharing, training and career opportunities (Gray 1990, p. 17).

While the nature of enterprise bargaining in Australia is still evolving, a number of key concerns have been raised in relation to women workers. These include:

- the impact on pay equity—the centralised wage fixing system is said to be a major factor in improving the gender gap in wages (Australia's current gap of 83% (Labour Research Centre 1990, p. 37), still compares favourably with countries with decentralised wage fixing systems, e.g. Japan—44.3% (Burgman 1990, p. 15));
- the danger that capacity to bargain may be linked to location in the economy and 'union muscle'—women predominate in the least organised and least strategically important industry sectors (Burgman 1990, p. 16);
- the link to productivity gains—this is more difficult to identify in the service industries where women predominate than in the male-dominated manufacturing industries (Ellison, Hunt & MacDermott 1990, p. 7);
- concerns that workers will need the opportunity to develop skills and consultative committees to facilitate bargaining (McCreadie 1991, p. 34);
- the danger that 'flexibility' clauses in enterprise agreements will disadvantage women (McCreadie 1991, p. 34); and
- the danger that workplace agreements may exclude some occupational groups (MacDermott, forthcoming, p. 25).

The interpretation of enterprise bargaining proposed by the Federal opposition raises additional concerns for workers, particularly in relation to a weakened role for unions. At the same time, the place of skill on the political agenda is unclear. In an analysis of the influential Business Council of Australia (BCA) document *Enterprise Bargaining Units: A Better Way of Working*, Ewer and others (1991, p. 125) imply that interest in skill is waning. The employer agenda is based on the assumption that work should be tailored to a product or process, each requiring a unique skills profile. Skill formation will be controlled by large employers, and accredited skills will lack portability (Ewer et al. 1991, pp. 125–6). This scenario, if realised, would obviously have disastrous implications for women.



## Conclusion

There are repeated calls throughout the literature for a more rigorous theoretical treatment of skill across research interests. The material reviewed here indicates that the concept of skill is clearly socially constructed and gendered, and that it is ideological in character, serving to differentiate between men and women, valuing the work of men more highly. The construction of skill labels can be seen in the light of struggles for power and control in the workplace. The gendered construction of skill labels underpins our industrial relations and training systems, in a way which clearly disadvantages women in the current climate.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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### **Jill Blackmore**

Jill Blackmore has been a lecturer in social and administrative studies at Deakin University since 1987, following two years of teaching at Monash University. While teaching mathematics, history and general studies for fifteen years in the Victorian state secondary school system she earned a master's degree in educational studies at Monash University in the history of education, and later an MA in administration and policy analysis and a PhD in history and sociology at Stanford University. Her teaching experience has influenced her current academic research interests in gender relations, teacher unions, school-based decision making and administration, school-to-work transition, history of education and evaluation.

### **Michael Brown**

Mike is an experienced TAFE teacher who became directly involved with the TAFE Curriculum response to industry restructuring. He worked for three years developing a new Graduate Diploma in Industrial and Adult Education at Deakin University (Geelong campus). He recently moved back into TAFE curriculum to a new position which combines both of these previous roles doing curriculum research and projects, as well as working educationally with TAFE teachers at Victoria University of Technology. Mike has an active interest in issues relating to skill formation and gender politics.

### **Elaine Butler**

Elaine has a longstanding interest in issues around women and work, especially as they intersect with education and 'training'. Her academic position(s) with the Centre for Human Resource Studies and the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of South Australia offer Elaine opportunities to bring together teaching, research and consultancies; her experiences from working in industry (commerce and business; human and community services) with those of education (adult, TAFE, community and workplace) and the development of courses and programs, both in Australia and overseas.

Elaine is a member of the South Australian Community Services and Health Industry Training Advisory Board. Her current research interests focus on critical (feminist) pedagogy of work knowledge, and the development of transformative gender-centred curriculum models and pedagogies, for vocational education.

#### **Ann Byrne**

Ann is the Director of the Labour Research Centre Inc. The LRC has been active in the areas of workplace change particularly skill recognition and work design to promote skill-related career paths. The primary stages of industry restructuring and reform involve the development of consultative processes which allows the workplace to have a say. The LRC has been involved in projects across the manufacturing and service industries. As a result the LRC has been at the forefront in the debate on skill identification particularly for women workers. The LRC also prepared *Pay Equity for Women in Australia* for the National Women's Consultative Council.

#### **Sara Charlesworth**

Sara is a consultant researcher and has worked extensively around women's employment issues both within and outside Victorian unions, working for FLAIEU, the MEU and the Women's Employment Branch. Sara is also a part-time member of the Victorian Equal Opportunity Board. Currently, she is working on a project funded by the Department of Industrial Relations' Pay Equity Program and is investigating the establishment of appropriate work value of community services workers in local government. The project aims ultimately to develop strategies for the MEU to achieve pay equity for this group of workers.

#### **Helen Connole**

Helen is a Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Human Resource Studies at the University of South Australia. She has an (elderly) PhD in educational psychology and has since moved on to feminist pedagogy and issues in the recognition of the skills of women workers. Her most recent projects are the development of national draft core competency standards for the occupation of school assistant and an ongoing investigation of the politics of interpersonal competencies in the workplace.

#### **Cathy Emery**

Cathy, until 1993, was a Project Worker, based at the Social and Community

Services Industry Training Board in Melbourne. She has been working on a project which has explored issues associated with developing competency standards in community services. She has also developed an interest in gender and skill through studies at the University of New England–Northern Rivers. Cathy is presently involved in a community education project in Kiribati.

#### **Robyn Francis**

Robyn is the Executive Director of the Transport and Storage Industry Training Board whose responsibility is to provide advice to government about the training needs in an industry which has been notoriously neglectful of training and where women are very poorly represented. She has worked for a number of years in the field of workplace basic education and before that came from a background in community literacy/basic education programs.

In making that transition from adult and further education to industry training she brings a particular interest in the issue of women's roles in male-dominated industry and in the access of workers with literacy and language difficulties to real training and career options.

#### **Sue Harper**

Sue works for Victoria's Department of Business Employment, in the office of Employment, as the manager of Skill Link. Previous to this she was working in the Women's Employment Branch where she conducted a major research project on recognising and tapping the skills of women workers in the hospitality industry. The report of the project, *Professional Service—with a Smile*, found that employees possess and use as a part of their job a wide range of skills which have traditionally been unrecognised and undervalued. The report argues that although a new classification structure and industry training arrangements are an improvement on the old, there are still formidable barriers to overcome if women are to have genuine access to career paths.

#### **Rosemary Harris**

Rosemary has done typing/office work for some thirty years, in five different countries, including running her own secretarial business in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. Mostly by part-time study, she has completed an Arts degree (University of Queensland 1977–83), a Masters in Women's Studies (University of New South Wales 1984), and a Diploma in Continuing Education (University of New England 1988–91). She is currently doing 'women's work' in the lowest levels of the Australian Public Service while writing a book about the effects of computer technology on women's typing work (*Take this, Miss*

*Jones! : From Typewriter to Computer in Women's Office Work*, to be published mid-1994 by University of Queensland Press) and plotting her escape back into her own computer training business.

#### **Sue Kenna**

Sue is a Research Officer with the Victorian Branch of the MEU. She has worked closely with the Union's community services members during the process of award restructuring in local government. The Union has been involved in a project of skills recognition for these workers, most of whom are home carers. This process has achieved a better career path for these women in the restructured Local Government Award.

#### **Kim Lazenby**

Kim is employed by the Australian National Training Authority in Queensland. In her previous position she was a Senior Project Officer with a Women's Adviser's Unit of the South Australian Department of Labour, on secondment from the Western Australian Department of Employment, Vocational Education and Training. At that time, her position in WA was Co-ordinator, Women's Employment and Training Unit. She has experience in mainstream industrial training and women's employment and training and has worked on both policy development and program implementation in these areas. While with the Women's Adviser's Unit, Kim worked with Cate Poynton on a project undertaken as part of a broader focus on women and award restructuring, *What's in a Word?: Identifying and Naming Women's Skills*. The focus of this study is on clerical work but the findings are of wider relevance in questioning how women describe their work skills.

#### **Cate Poynton**

Cate has recently commenced work in the Department of Language and Interactive Studies, University of Western Sydney. Previous to this Cate was Senior Lecturer in Communication Studies and a founding member of the Centre of Gender Studies in the University of South Australia. She has done considerable research on the role of language in negotiating social relations, particularly gender relations, with a special interest in the negotiation of power in face-to-face interaction. She has published extensively in the area of language and gender, including the book *Language and Gender: Making the Difference* (republished Oxford University Press, 1990). While in South Australia, and with Kim Lazenby, Cate undertook the research project, *What's in a Word?*.



**Mira Robertson**

Mira is a freelance writer and consultant. Previously she was the Acting Local Government Industrial Co-ordinator for the Australian Services Union. She worked at the ASU from 1986 and in 1990 and 1991 was specifically involved in the development and negotiation of a new restructured Federal Award for Local Government in Victoria.

In 1990 she undertook a research project with Anna Kokkinos for the National Office of the MOA (now ASU). This research looked at the potential of award restructuring to assist positively the position of women workers in local government throughout Australia. In particular it focused on training and career paths within the award restructuring agenda.

**Kim Windsor**

Kim is an industry consultant of the Australian Centre for Best Practice Ltd, previously the Workplace Resource Centre, Victoria. Kim's work has concentrated on areas of industry policy, work organisation and job design. In recent years the emphasis of this work has been to explore possibilities for restructuring work and redesigning jobs in ways that can improve jobs at the same time as improving productivity. Much of this work has concentrated on industries and occupations where women predominate—and particularly the textile, clothing and footwear, and food industries. In an environment that emphasises increased skill levels and greater flexibility as the basis of a more competitive industry structure, the options for redesigning traditionally low-skilled work processes need to be much more extensively developed.



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