Learning to Learn Through Work? The Importance of Australian Apprenticeship and Traineeship Policies in Young Workers' Learning Careers

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Abstract

This paper examines young workers' beginning engagement in learning through work, placing it in the context of Australian policy on entry-level training. Eleven young people were followed through their first year of full-time work and the significant adults involved in their working and learning lives were also interviewed. The study demonstrates that the presence of a contract of training (an apprenticeship or traineeship) is a strong predictor of a young worker's propensity to regard the workplace as a learning environment. However, unsatisfactory interactions with employment or training providers can create disillusionment with policy interventions that are meant to assist. Moreover, the habit of learning through work is not only a function of policy and training frameworks, but is also affected by individuals' abilities to learn how to learn. The paper concludes by arguing that, for those young people starting work who are not in a contract of training, additional assistance may be required in order for them to continue the habit of lifelong learning in the new environment of work.

Introduction

There has been much policy interest in Australia over the past fifteen to twenty years in the area of entry-level training for young people. This interest has proceeded in tandem with wider changes to the vocational education and training (VET) system in Australia, known during the 1990s as the Training Reform Agenda (Smith and Keating 1997). Developments associated with training reform have included the introduction of traineeships to complement apprenticeships; the 'reform' of VET into a

competency-based system; the encouragement of private provision of government-funded training; the use of key competencies (AEC/MOVEET 1993) as a basis for developing generic skills in both school and VET sectors; and, most recently, training packages, which have introduced national qualifications, and therefore apprenticeships and traineeships, into new career areas. Such developments have been mirrored in other countries, such as the UK, New Zealand and a number of European countries (CEDEFOP 1998). Australian policy initiatives have been perhaps the most comprehensive, and have persisted essentially unchanged through changes of government at both federal and state levels.

While these developments have impacted upon all students in VET and upon many workers in industry, it can be argued that their greatest impact, and certainly a key focus of policy makers, has been on young people leaving school and beginning their working life. There have been many evaluations of different policy initiatives over the years but few studies into the actual experiences of young people leaving school and making their initial forays into the changed working and training landscape.

This paper reports on the experiences of eleven young people who left school in New South Wales at the end of 1997. The study was undertaken at a time when new initiatives relating to youth employment and training were 'bedding down'. The majority of the young people were employed as apprentices or trainees. Their working and learning experiences were documented until early 1999. They provide an insight into the impact of government policies related to employment and training upon young people, and the influence of such policies upon their attitude to learning through work. The two major research questions for the study were 'What did the young people learn during their first year of full-time work?' and 'How did they learn it?' Some of the findings of the study have been reported elsewhere (e.g. Smith 2002, Smith, forthcoming), but this paper focuses primarily upon how the young people's experiences of learning through working were affected by government policies intended to facilitate that learning.

Background

This section briefly reviews some of the existing literature relating to young people's transition to from school to work and learning to learn through work, and describes specific Australian developments relating to apprenticeships and traineeships.

Transition to work

It is generally agreed that young people face some risk in leaving school and starting work, partly because of the disappearance of some entry-level jobs following

technological changes and the shift from manufacturing to service industries (Sweet 1988a). However the level of risk is now generally acknowledged to be somewhat less than was believed during the early 1990s (Marks and Fleming 1999) and is generally accepted as being confined to specific groups of young people (Dwyer 1996, OECD 1998). Nevertheless, with Australian retention rates to Year 12 dropping during the second half of the 1990s (Marsh and Williamson 1999), concern remains that the large numbers of young people not proceeding directly to university may become trapped in the secondary labour market unless they gain access to career and training pathways.

Lifelong learning and work

There has recently been a resurgence of policy attention to the notion of lifelong learning (e.g. OECD 1996). International literature on lifelong learning generally stresses economic, civic, social and personal advantages. Each of these advantages has been emphasised at different times; for example during the 1970s lifelong learning primarily referred to literacy and recurrent education. The most recent 'recreation' of the concept (Ni Cheallaigh 2000) is far more instrumental and relates primarily to economic ends, or the need for workers to learn new skills through life as the economy evolves. It is now frequently linked with labour market issues (Gallagher 2001). Such a close link between lifelong learning and work has been contested (Edwards and Usher 2001), with some authors arguing against the notion of docile 'worker-learners' (Butler 1996). However, the usefulness of workers' lifelong learning to the economy may not necessarily negate the possibility of fruitful individual development. The role of workplaces as sites for individuals' engagement in lifelong learning (Billett 2001, Gerber 2001) thus needs more examination.

As Ni Cheallaigh (2000) points out, the increased attention being given to lifelong learning at a policy level means that attention is focused on particular key areas that government policy can affect, of which the transition from school into full-time work is a prime example. The next section of this paper summarises some Australian policy interventions in this area.

Australian government policy: apprenticeships and traineeships

Until 1985, the only training-related Australian government-sponsored route into full-time work was apprenticeship. Apprenticeships, normally lasting four years, were confined to a limited number of trades, mainly in the 'traditional' industry sectors such as engineering and construction, and were generally the province of white Australian-born males. Female apprentices were employed in large numbers only in hairdressing. The Kirby report (1985) proposed the establishment of traineeships for 16 and 17-year-old school leavers. Traineeships, like apprenticeships, involve government-funded off-the-job training, but last for only twelve months. It was hoped

that traineeships would extend funded entry-level training into a wider range of industries and across a broader range of young people.

While initially the take-up of traineeships was slow (Robinson 1999), various initiatives have more recently led to large increases in numbers so that, by 1999, trainees accounted for nearly three-quarters of all trainee and apprentice commencements. Over 100 000 trainees were in training in that year (Kapuscinski 2001). Traineeships, like apprenticeships, are now open to people of any age (Sweet 1998b), rather than just to young people, and are available in a wide range of industries. Traineeships and apprenticeships are combined under the umbrella term 'New Apprenticeships',[1] which is the term preferred by the federal government's Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). However, most state governments and VET practitioners continue to use the separate terms traineeships and apprenticeships, although national statistics are no longer collected separately.

At the time of the Kirby report, traineeships had two underlying goals: to decrease youth unemployment and to improve the skills base in the economy (Scherer 1985). There have been shifts in the relative ascendancy of the two goals over the past fifteen years. Most recently, changes made to funding rules in many states in 2001 have shifted the emphasis firmly back to labour market outcomes rather than workforce skills development. For example, training subsidies are not available to certain groups of workers although employment subsidies remain. At the time of the research study, however, rapid expansion of numbers was proceeding without a clear view from governments about the purpose of the expansion in numbers of trainees.

Traineeships, and to a lesser extent apprenticeships, have been closely associated with two further developments in contracted training: user choice and 100 per cent on-the-job training. 'User choice' refers to the availability of funds for the off-the-job component of apprenticeships and traineeships. Employers, supposedly in conjunction with their apprentices and trainees, can select the training provider of their choice for off-the-job training. Government funding, distributed by state governments, flows directly to the selected training provider (Noble et al. 1997). In NSW at the time of the study, funding for apprentices was only available to TAFE, the public provider, but in most states all apprentice and trainee training has been subject to user choice since 1998. User choice policy has been extensively critiqued. Concerns about user choice policy include assertions that apprentices and trainees may not have the information (Selby Smith, Selby Smith and Ferrier 1996), power (DTEC Equity Policy Branch 1997), capacity or interest (Coopers & Lybrand 1996) to make decisions about their off-the-job training.

The 'off-the-job' component can be carried out entirely on-the-job if certain conditions are met. A training provider (registered training organisation or RTO) receives user

choice funding to monitor and assure the quality of training. If the employing organisation is itself registered as an RTO,[2] then it receives the user choice money itself. All employers of apprentices and trainees also receive commencement and (usually) completion payments from DEST. There are additional 'placement' payments available to providers of employment services who find jobs for apprentices and trainees. Payments are larger for disadvantaged groups such as Aboriginal or remote area young people. Group training companies (see next section) receive a special commencement payment for trainees but not for apprentices.

In the past three or four years, several accounts of 'rorts' or unethical manipulation of the apprenticeship and traineeship system have been presented. Schofield (1999) undertook reviews in three states which revealed instances of misuse of user choice and DEST funds. For example, she found instances of senior managers enrolled in low-level traineeships in order to access employment and training subsidies. Such abuses, also chronicled by the Senate Inquiry into the Quality of VET (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee 2000), contributed to the recent tightening up of user choice regulations. They were also one factor behind the introduction of the new Australian Quality Training Framework introduced by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) in 2001 for implementation from 2002 (Smith and Keating 2003). At the time of the study these abuses were only beginning to be publicly uncovered, although they were well-known to those working in the area.

The progress of apprentices and trainees through their employment and training is monitored by regulatory bodies in each state and territory. It is generally agreed that resources for monitoring are inadequate. Generally, intervention only occurs when a problem is reported by a young person or his or her parent. A risk management approach is also utilised by state training authorities; certain occupations or types of employer are recognised as having higher rates of problems or lower rates of completion, and are inspected from time to time. The criteria for 'risk', however, are not necessarily made available to employers or RTOs.

Group training companies

Group training companies employ apprentices and trainees, arrange their off-the-job training, and send them to work for host employers who 'lease' them for a weekly fee (Harris et al. 1998). Sometimes the apprentices and trainees experience a number of host employers, but in some cases they stay with one employer for the complete period of their contract (Smith 1996). Although GTCs have been in existence since the early 1980s, the numbers of apprentices and trainees employed by GTCs rose rapidly in the mid 1990s. Having been granted increased prominence and funding under various training reform measures, by 2000 GTCs employed 14 per cent of all Australian apprentices and

trainees (NCVER 2001). There are currently just under 200 GTCs in Australia, some employing over 1000 apprentices and trainees. The average number employed is 192 (ANTA 2002). GTCs employ a disproportionate number of apprentices compared with trainees and disproportionately more males than females (NCVER 2001).

While GTCs have played a valuable role in the growth of the apprenticeship and traineeship system, there have been areas of policy concern. These include financial management issues and some ethical dilemmas associated with GTCs' other activities. For example, if GTCs are also RTOs they can send their apprentices or trainees to their own training arm, thus receiving the user choice funding as well as the employment subsidy for that young person. A current review by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA 2002) addresses some of these issues.

Research method

Case studies were conducted, over a twelve-month period in 1998–1999, of eleven new full-time workers in New South Wales: eight in the rural city of Wagga Wagga and three in metropolitan Sydney. Four of the young people were apprentices, four were trainees, and three were juniors (the term given in the study to young workers not in contracted training). The young people were interviewed four times over the year, and their parents, managers and TAFE teachers (where appropriate) were interviewed twice. In total, 93 interviews were carried out.

Interviews were taped and transcribed, and analysed using both 'etic' issues (Stake 1995, p. 20) – concepts derived from the literature and the researcher's previous research (for example Smith 1998) – and 'emic' issues, arising from the participants' interests and responses. 'Etic' issues included the skills brought to the first job, the role of supervisors and fellow workers in training, the ways in which links were made between on and off-the-job training and the learning strategies consciously utilised by the young people. Some examples of 'emic' issues were movement from one job to another, the ways in which the participants dealt with difficulties and mistakes at work, problems with training providers, and shifting career views as the young people progressed through the year. Some of these (for example, job changes) became important because they were themes in several case studies; and others were taken up even when only mentioned by one participant because they appeared to offer useful areas for questioning in subsequent rounds of interviews. Learning from mistakes at work was one such issue.

The research was written up as eleven case studies using the individual as the 'primary unit of analysis' (Yin 1994) then the major themes were analysed for the apprentices, trainees and juniors respectively, and finally a full cross-case analysis. The trustworthiness of the research (Lincoln and Guba 1985) was primarily assured by triangulation in three respects: data source triangulation (within each case study there were serval participants),

theory triangulation (there was constant reference to the literature) and methodological triangulation (a focus group of senior New South Wales policy staff and practitioners working with young workers was convened at the beginning of the project). However, as with any case study, generalisation of the findings is problematic (Yin 1994). A further limitation was that some of the young people were more articulate and more open than others, which inevitably affected the quality of the data.

The parameters of the study were that participants should be:

- entering their first full-time employment after school or initial TAFE education;
- aged 15–19; and
- recruited as participants in the study before, or soon after, starting work.

The young people were employed in a range of industries, from traditional industry areas like engineering to 'newer' service industries such as hospitality. The industry areas were chosen as indicative of the areas in which school leavers typically work (Smith and Comyn, forthcoming). The participants were aged from 16 to 18; six were males and five were females; and two were from non-English speaking backgrounds. All had worked part-time before leaving school. Two had worked only in family businesses (a cafe and a farm respectively); interestingly, these two young people did not regard their part-time work as 'proper employment'. Table 1 provides information about the participants, and presents their pseudonyms, which will be used in the following discussion.

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Employment status	Industry area	Location
Brett	M	16	**Apprentice**	Engineering	Wagga
Heather	F	17	Apprentice	Hairdressing	Wagga
Paul	M	17	**Apprentice**	Electrical (contracting) (3 employers)	Sydney
Graham	M	18	Apprentice	Electrical (contract cleaning)	Wagga
Maddy	F	18	Trainee	Sports administration	Wagga
Mike	M	18	Trainee	Hospitality	Sydney
Cary	F	18	Trainee	Hospitality then retail	Wagga
Jared	M	18	Trainee	Meat processing[3]	Wagga
Tracey	F	17	Junior	Clerical (legal practice)	Wagga
Sophie	F	18	Junior	Clerical (weight loss) then clerical (real estate)	Sydney
Shaun	M	18	Junior	Retail (2 employers)	Wagga

Table 1: Distribution of research participants by personal characteristics, type of employment, initial industry area and location

Notes: (i) Young people from a non-English-speaking background are indicated with italics. (ii) Where employment was through a group training company, the word 'apprentice' is in bold type.

Overview of the first year of work

Over the twelve months of the study, all eleven young people remained in continuous employment, although four changed jobs. Three changed jobs once and Paul was in his third job by the end of the study. Figure 1 shows the work and study trajectories of the eleven young people before, during and after the study. It is worth noting that, of the four trainees, two went to university after the completion of their traineeships. In both cases these young people had made conscious decisions to seek some employment experience before deciding whether to go to university or not.

Each young person experienced a number of challenges and successes over the year. Among the four apprentices, Heather struggled with an ill-tempered employer (discussions with her TAFE teachers confirmed this man's reputation), and Brett with an over-critical TAFE teacher and an employer who, although well-meaning and supportive, utilised machinery so old-fashioned that Brett was ashamed to discuss it at TAFE. Paul failed his year's study at TAFE and did not relate well to his first two employers, although he managed to secure a third job and an agreement from TAFE to repeat the TAFE year. Only Graham had a relatively smooth year, partly, perhaps, because he worked in a family business with three other family members.

Among the trainees, Cary's first manager was replaced with another who appeared to be tyrannical in management style and refused to acknowledge Cary's contract of training. Cary was headhunted to a new job, where she was assistant manager of a clothing store, and eventually completed her traineeship. Jared and Maddy both had successful years. Jared was highly regarded by his managers, who would have offered him promotion had he not decided to go to university full-time. Mike was also regarded as highly promising by his employers. However he did experience setbacks. For example, he lost a chance for promotion towards the end of the year when he was caught partying one night with customers in the hotel bar which he was managing at that time.

The 'juniors' (those not in apprenticeships and traineeships) had somewhat less eventful years. Tracey remained in the same job and, apart from minor difficulties associated with managing periods of heavy workload, progressed satisfactorily with the assistance of an experienced and concerned mentor. Sophie did not settle well in her first job. Her manager complained that Sophie made many mistakes and appeared unmotivated, although the evidence suggested that Sophie had received inadequate induction and training. By the end of the year, however, she had managed to find another job in an area of work, real estate, in which she developed a great interest and felt valued as an employee. Shaun received support from both of his employers and was relatively contented in his work. Both of his employers, however, felt that Shaun's heart was not in retail work.[4]

Apprentices

BRETT			
Work	P/T job	Job 1	Remained in Job 1
Study	Year 10 school	TAFE day release	Continued TAFE day release
HEATHER			
Work	P/T jobs	JOB 1	Remained in Job 1
Study	Part of Year 11	TAFE day release	Continued TAFE day release
PAUL			
Work	P/T jobs	Job 1 Job 2 Job 3	Remained in Job 3
Study	Part Year 11; 6 mths TAFE	TAFE day release	Repeated year at TAFE
GRAHAM			
Work	P/T job	Job 1	Remained in Job 1
Study	Year 12 school	TAFE day release	Continued TAFE day release

Trainees

MADDY			
Work	P/T jobs	Job 1	Casual work, Job 1 employer
Study	Year 12 school	TAFE distance education	Went to university
MIKE			
Work	P/T jobs	Job 1	Remained with Job 1 employer
Study	Year 12 school	TAFE day release	Considering another TAFE qualification
CARY			
Work	P/T jobs	Job 1 Job 2	Remained in Job 2
Study	Year 12 school	On-the-job traineeship	
JARED			
Work	Family farm	Job 1	Went to university
Study	Year 12 school	On-the-job traineeship	

Juniors

TRACEY			
Work	P/T jobs; started Job 1	Job 1	Remained in Job 1
Study	Year 12 school		
SOPHIE			
Work	P/T work, family business	Job 1 Job 2	Remained in Job 2
Study	Year 12 school; 1 yr TAFE		
SHAUN			
Work	P/T jobs	Job 1 Job 2	Remained in Job 2
Study	Year 12 school		

Figure 1: Work and study trajectories before, during and after the study

Discussion

The strongest finding relating to learning at work was that the young people learned most when they were employed under a contract of training. This was partly due to the obvious fact that their learning at work was usually augmented by off-the-job training. The quality of such training, however, varied quite considerably. For example, Brett's fitting and machining apprenticeship course was taught by the use of self-paced competency-based modules. These were widely recognised as not being effective. Brett's employer said: 'It's more of a university environment – they throw them to the wolves. Most of them [the students] are behind and I hear around the town everybody else is too.'

Brett became extremely anxious when he fell 'behind'. Despite the course being designated as 'self-paced' there was an expected rate of progress. The responsibility for keeping up this rate of progress had shifted from the teacher to the student with the introduction of the new competency-based curriculum.

Those trainees (Cary and Jared) who received their 'off-the-job' training on the job were not satisfied with their training. Cary's training ceased as soon as her first manager left, and Jared's after an initial classroom-based course. Maddy's off-the-job training was by distance education and was, therefore, effectively on the job. She found this unsatisfactory and managed to persuade her manager to allow her to attend some modules offered locally face-to-face.

However, even the on-the-job trainees learned more than the juniors. This seemed to be because they saw learning as part of their job. In the interviews at the beginning of their employment the young people and their parents had all commented favourably on the learning component of the jobs they were to undertake. Brett's father, for example, said 'Education is part of doing a trade. Although you never stop learning, whatever you're doing, at TAFE you can pick up knowledge quicker. You're doing the theory side of it and the practical at the same time; it's the best way to learn.'

The apprentices and the trainees actively sought out information in order to complete their learning materials. At times, however, this was spasmodic; for example Jared left his training folder in his work locker for months before finally taking it home and only retrieved it when he knew he was leaving the job and wanted to complete his qualification before he left.

The trainees were more interested than the apprentices in converting their qualifications into higher-level VET qualifications or university courses. Maddy, for example, had made enquiries before starting her traineeship and believed that it could

offer some credit towards a sports management degree. Mike was set on pursuing high-level VET qualifications in hospitality. Cary, unfortunately, became somewhat disillusioned with the VET system following her difficulty in obtaining her qualification. She said:

> I took up a traineeship because I thought I'd get some recognition out of it, but I have got nothing … I just want to be free of all the rubbish I went through with XXX [her first manager] and everyone … I am at the point where I wouldn't bother doing a traineeship again and I wouldn't recommend it to anyone. I thought traineeships were wonderful and I did all these speeches with the Business Enterprise Centre to high school students saying how good they are. I feel like a big idiot now because I've got nothing. In my opinion it was wasted time.

In general, though, the trainees regarded themselves as being on a career path with management as their goal. For example, Mike said 'I want to go to the top – that's my plan. TAFE is as good as university for getting there. Quickly getting to management is a goal but stopping to see things on the way is part of it as well.' This attitude was in contrast with that of the apprentices, who appeared to be wedded to the practice of their trade rather than aspiring to advancement to senior management positions. They visualised themselves as qualified tradespeople looking after apprentices of their own, but only in the context of a small business.

The trainees appeared anxious to learn as much as they could during the twelve months of their contracts while the apprentices were content to take things more slowly. Knowing they had four years to learn their trade meant that neither they nor their employers saw a need to hurry. Thus the apprentices did not actively seek out knowledge while the trainees, in contrast, tended to ask questions and seek different experiences. For example, Mike was notorious in his hotel for asking questions:

> I ask questions right to the end of the day. I've just got to know everything and how it's done. Like even the way different tables have different names … Joyce goes insane: 'They're just tables!' She knows I need to do it to learn, but she hates being the one who has to answer all the time.

Jared sought opportunities to rotate jobs with other workers, partly to alleviate boredom but partly to learn about new areas of work.

The tradition of training in the apprenticed industries meant that the supervisors generally taught the apprentices well. They were tolerant of mistakes. Brett's

supervisor said, 'I had a lot of trouble with [teaching him] the micrometer at first, with measuring shafts. That took him a couple of days and I had to stop him working for two or three hours and show him, but then he got it.' There was some evidence that there was a growing tradition of training in the 'traineeship' industries. For example, Cary's first manager was enthusiastic about employing a trainee as she had mentored a trainee in her previous job. Mike's hotel had routinised the employment of a cohort of trainees each year and they were well entrenched in the hotel's internal labour market. Nevertheless Mike noted that he received his best training in the kitchens, from the cooks, who were accustomed to training apprentices. He said: 'The other day I was using clarified butter and as I was putting it away he [the chef] caught up with me and said "How do we get clarified butter, what's it used for?"'

The origin of the traineeship system as a labour market program for disadvantaged Year 10 school leavers appears to have left a problematic curriculum legacy. Trainees generally study a Certificate II course, although other levels can be linked to traineeships. This circumstance is closely tied up with complex issues relating to the relationship between the nominal hours of a qualification and its degree of difficulty. An earlier evaluation of traineeships (Evaluation and Monitoring Branch, DEET 1993) had suggested that some trainees found their curriculum too easy, and this finding is fully supported by the current research. While traineeships were originally aimed at early school leavers, most trainees have in fact completed all years of school. The trainees in the study, two of whom were undertaking traineeships as an immediate alternative to university, found their TAFE training far too easy. They made comments like 'Because it's further education, I expected more. I guess TAFE's a bit weak.' They would have preferred a more demanding course. The apprentices, on the other hand, Year 10 or 11 leavers, found their Certificate III courses demanding. Two of them needed to access extra learning support at TAFE.

Some differences have been discussed between the apprentices and trainees. However the greatest difference was found between these young people and the 'juniors'. The juniors were left unsupported once they joined the workforce, with no person designated to oversee their learning and training. This was not a major problem where the employer was enlightened and had good training practices, but there was no additional route for learning in cases where this did not happen. The juniors did not reflect the same attitude to learning as the young people in contracts of training. Not only did they have no firm plans for further study, they did not talk about work as a place where learning took place. They did not find a reason to enter formal education or training since, at work, they were taught all they needed to know to do their current jobs. Two talked about 'doing a TAFE course' but did not get around to enrolling. Their learning about the industries they were in and their occupation in a more general sense remained relatively modest, because of their lack of exposure to external

training, and so they remained unaware of career possibilities and learning opportunities.

By contrast the apprentices and trainees often commented that they expected to continue learning after their formal training was completed, through encountering new situations and from more experienced workers. As already mentioned, the trainees were all looking for further qualifications, while, although the apprentices did not yet have plans for formal study after the end of their apprenticeship, they all firmly expected to continue learning until the day they retired. Paul, for example, when asked when he would reach the end of a continuum between novice worker and skilled worker, said that he would never reach the end of the continuum because there would always be new things to learn.

The relationship of the study to Australian policy

Apprenticeships and traineeships

The study clearly indicates that apprenticeships and traineeships, when the stakeholders take them seriously, are well-respected, valued ways of combining work and study that lead to good learning and career outcomes. The findings clearly support the need for on-the-job training to be underpinned by off-the-job training away from the workplace. Only in this way can time be guaranteed for study and the young people given a broader perspective rather than just being trained for one workplace's needs. It appears that the young people benefit from face-to-face training in a group situation and value the close attention of their teachers.

While the Commonwealth government prefers to treat apprenticeships and traineeships as programs that are essentially similar, the study suggests that participants do not regard them in this way. Apprenticeships have a special meaning to those who undertake them, their employers and their parents. They are highly valued and this value springs from their association with skilled manual work as well as from the combination of work and study. The study suggests that the special meaning attached to apprenticeships needs to be preserved.

From the study it seemed that traineeships appear to have a different meaning. They appear to have a higher status among the more academically inclined young people than apprenticeships, and this may be related to their perceived – and actual – opportunities to be extended into further study and hence into management careers. However these perceptions are clouded by the actual academic content of the two qualifications, with apprenticeships offering a more rigorous curriculum than traineeships. It is difficult to see how this difficulty can be overcome within current

VET structures as apprenticeships are associated with qualifications of far greater length than traineeships.

Because of the rapid 'graduation' of the trainees they were able to train others in turn. Both Cary and Mike were training new staff well before the end of their traineeships. Much research into apprenticeships (e.g. Smith 1996) has shown that those who have been apprentices want to train the next generation. Since traineeships generally last for only one year compared with the four years of a typical apprenticeship, generational change in traineeships is much swifter. Thus the tradition of formalised training may develop quite quickly in the 'traineeship' industries such as retail and hospitality.

Group training companies

The study illustrates both some advantages and some disadvantages of group training companies. Brett's company employed all the apprentices (an intake of two each year, meaning that eight were always employed) through a local GTC. This enabled the company to avoid personnel and payroll paperwork and also to preserve flexibility in a somewhat uncertain commercial environment. However there was a disadvantage. As the company was not the formal employer, it was not able to intervene with the training provider, the local TAFE college, when the TAFE training was perceived as unsatisfactory. Brett himself and his parents were also unhappy with the off-the-job training but, despite their phone calls to the GTC, no action was taken. Paul was also employed by a group training company. This worked in his favour, as the GTC was able to find alternative host employers when Paul's first two jobs did not proceed favourably. The GTC assisted despite the fact that Paul appeared to be an unmotivated and somewhat ineffective worker, as interviews with his first two employers and even his own comments confirmed.

The effects of marketisation

Cary's experiences illustrate most clearly the problems that can be caused by unscrupulous operators in both the training and the employment services markets. Cary had been recruited into her job through a local employment services provider. Under Commonwealth funding arrangements, this provider would have received a fee for placing Cary in employment. In a somewhat bizarre turn of events, Cary's first manager lost her job and was replaced by the very person who had previously been Cary's case manager at the employment services provider. Despite having 'signed Cary up', this person refused, in her new role, to acknowledge that Cary was employed under a traineeship and, when Cary left the job, refused to release Cary's training manuals until Cary's new manager intervened. When Cary had completed her manuals and sought to receive her qualification, she was unsure whom her nominated training provider was, as this had never been made clear to her. Enquiries

to the local office of the state training authority resulted in a phone call from a training provider 130km distant, apparently the provider who was meant to monitor her training. The person who made the phone call, however, also refused to take any responsibility for the matter, and it was not until the researcher contacted the manager of the state training authority's office that the impasse was overcome and Cary received her qualification.

Cary's misfortunes were similar to several examples uncovered by Schofield (1999) in her reviews of traineeships in three states, and with more recent scandals in the employment services industries, uncovered by the general media during 2001. Cary's case study illustrates the devastating effects that poor practice in such areas can have on young people's working lives. Despite being a capable and assertive young woman, Cary experienced a complete lack of power in navigating the complex training and employment services systems and was able to be manipulated by adults acting in their own interests.

Individual propensity to learn

The discussion so far has suggested that policy interventions in relation to entry-level training have a profound impact on the propensity of young people to learn through work. The only difficulty raised so far has been the disillusionment created in young people by the abuse by employers or training providers of the policy environment. However the study also highlighted individual differences in learning capability that affected learning through work.

The capability of individuals to learn is often discussed in current debates about generic skills (e.g. Kearns 2001). For example, an influential American study of workplace basic skills (Carnevale 1991) stresses the importance of learning to learn. Knowing how to learn is a necessary precondition of lifelong learning. However, 'learning to learn' is rarely operationalised, perhaps because, as R. M. Smith (1984, p. 19) suggests, it is hindered by different understandings of what the phrase actually means. Kehoe and Macrae (1999) also suggest that the process of learning to learn is only partly understood. R. M. Smith suggests that effective learning ability is characterised by five things: a spirit of inquiry, transference capability, subject matter mastery, self-understanding and (learning) process awareness, or what Maudsley (1979, in Smith 1984, p. 57) calls meta-learning.

Annett and Sparrow (1985) look more closely at the *process* of learning to learn, suggesting that learning to learn can partly be achieved by the promotion and practice of habits, the most important of which are systematic observation, analysing events, and adopting a questioning attitude. These three 'habits' were used as headings under

which to examine the learning capabilities of the young people in the study. There were some clear differences between the young people in this area. Most of the young people were able to observe what was going on around them and learn at least something from it. But there were wide variations. For example, Brett observed soon after starting work, that in the workshop: 'A lot of them [the other apprentices] muck around and as soon as they see the foreman they run away and do their jobs so when he's gone out of the shop they muck around.' Brett clearly understood what the culture was in his workplace, and made a conscious decision during the year not to be one of the 'mucking around' apprentices but to apply himself consistently. Sophie, on the other hand, ran foul of her first organisation's customs. Her supervisor complained that: 'Sophie's focus isn't on the job, like she structures her lunchbreak around her friend up the road, and she does make quite long personal phone calls.' Sophie observed other workers eating breakfast at work and started doing so herself, but failed to understand that the other workers were 'allowed' to do so because they arrived early. The differences between Brett and Sophie illustrate the ability of some people to 'analyse events' (Annett and Sparrow 1985) rather than simply observe them.

Annett and Sparrow's (1985) third 'learning to learn' process, adopting a questioning attitude, also served to differentiate the young people. Mike's questioning about workplace tasks and knowledge has already been discussed. He also quickly identified and befriended the staff member with the 'finger on the pulse' of organisational gossip, whom he described as 'a real gossip queen; if there is anything going down in the hotel she knows about it and then it's not too long until I find out'. Shaun extended his questioning to customers; he spoke of 'scoring knowledge' from customers about the products he sold. Some of the other young people did not employ questioning so much. The apprentices, in particular, waited to be told and shown.

Questioning was not simply a process; it was also an attitude. Mike, for example, analysed and questioned many things that went on within the large hotel where he worked. For example, he quickly noted the different ethnic groups and their segregation into different areas of work:

> [The kitchen hands] don't have a choice. They're nearly all Filipino and they don't speak English that well. There was a guy who was a fighter pilot and he's mopping floors … Banquets is a woggy sort of thing but the bar staff is all Australian – I think this happens partly because some of the new people are friends of the old people, and being the same sort of people they work together.

Mike had discussed this issue with a TAFE friend and found that other hotels seemed to have the same patterns of ethnic segregation.

Mike and Cary both trained new staff and both commented that they learnt a lot this way, not only about the content of what they were teaching, but also about processes of learning. Cary said 'I'd just babble everything off in one go and they are just looking at me with really blank faces and I'd say "You didn't catch that, did you?" and they'd say "No." After that I learned to go through things in stages and I'd show them each bit and let them practice.' They both said that through training others they learned more about how they themselves learned.

Conclusion

The discussion of learning to learn has emphasised the individuality of people's learning careers at work. It also needs to be noted that many other factors were found to influence the amount of learning that took place. Such factors included the training structures of the organisation and the complexity of the tasks allocated to the young people. Nevertheless the weight of the evidence collected during the research supports the notion that a young person's propensity to learn at work is greatly increased by the linking of such work with a contract of training (an apprenticeship or traineeship).

Young people not in a contract of training may not develop the habit of learning at and through work and hence could experience disadvantage throughout their working lives. In the absence of a contract of training, active involvement by an informed and interested adult can assist juniors in that situation. For example, Tracey had such an adult in her supervisor. Other young people might utilise their parents. However many young people would not have access to such an informed person to act as a learning mentor.

There are possible policy solutions to this problem, including the utilisation of existing or new agencies to provide 'learning advice' to all young people starting work, not just those at risk or those entering contracted training. A report by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (Spierings 1999) has advocated that early school leavers should be entitled to a bank of 'full-time equivalent education' with a monetary value, which they can use to 'purchase' education and training from a variety of sources. This suggestion is in line with initiatives elsewhere, for example individual learning accounts in the United Kingdom. The current study shows, however, that advice is needed more than, and certainly as well as, the purchase of training. The Career and Transition Pilot Program announced by Brendan Nelson, the Australian Commonwealth Minister for Education, Science and Training, on 4 March 2002

(www.dest.gov.au/ministers/nelson) appears at first glance to address this need. CATS has funded 23 pilot programs to 'actively support teenagers as they plan their future'. These programs are managed by local management committees and one of the outcomes is for young people to develop 'learning pathways plans'. However a careful reading of the CATS documents suggests that the main purpose of the 18-month post-employment tracking is to evaluate pre-employment activities (such as careers advice) in schools, rather than actively to encourage additional learning for young people once they are in work. A similar comment can be made about the position of 'transition broker' advocated by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (Spierings 1999).

Such suggestions and initiatives, valuable though they are, seem to contain an implicit assumption that once young people have made the transition from school to regular employment they are 'safe' and can manage their own careers. The research reported in this paper suggests that, without a contract of training that involves a reputable training provider, young people may be floundering or stagnating in the early months of work. If this is the case, it represents a lost opportunity to develop lifelong learning habits in new workers.

Notes

[1] Earlier umbrella terms included AVTS (Australian Vocational Training System) and MAATS (Modern Apprenticeship and Traineeship System).

[2] This is common in the case of larger employers such as the big retail and fast food chains.

[3] Jared's traineeship was of a particular nature. In his company, in common with many in food processing at that time, all new employees, irrespective of age, were taken on as trainees and taken through a Certificate II program. This was in response to particular patterns of government subsidies and incentives.

[4] Three years after the completion of the study, Shaun commenced a university course in music production which had always been his major spare-time interest.

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