

Lifelong learning in workplace settings: the case of the young worker

Lorna Unwin, University of Sheffield

Introduction

This paper will explore the implications for workplace learning of changes in the demand for skills across industry and commerce and, as a consequence, the lifelong learning prospects of young employees. In doing so, it will examine the ways in which the United Kingdom's (UK) flagship youth training scheme, the Modern Apprenticeship, needs to develop and improve. Although the immediate policy context for this paper is that of the UK, the paper is set within a broader landscape of global economic and societal change, and evolving lifestyles.

Young people, throughout the developed world, are constantly being told they need to prepare themselves for a place in the new 'knowledge economy' where intellect has overtaken physical strength as the requirement for employment:

For the first time, knowledge is the primary source of economic productivity. It has started to penetrate most of the products we create and become a core resource for organisations, as well as an emblem of individual employability. (Bentley, 2000, p.17)

In the 1999 White Paper, *Learning to Succeed*, the UK government asserted that, "In the information and knowledge based economy, investment in human capital - in the intellect and creativity of people - is replacing past patterns of investment in plant, machinery and physical labour". (DfEE, 1999, p.12) These exhortations arise out of a belief by policymakers that economic globalisation is dividing the world along Fordist and Post-Fordist lines. Businesses are splitting their operations between different countries according to certain conditions. For the mass production part of their operation, they will locate in the developing world where they can pay low wages, and force the developed world to compete for the highly skilled, technologically advanced parts of the operation. The UK, under both the previous Conservative administrations and the current Labour government, has decided it wants to pitch for the high skill end of the globalisation continuum. Hence, people must acquire qualifications and be prepared to learn throughout life in order to have the necessary intellectual capital required by employers. As Avis (1995, p.58) has argued, policymakers and other believers "celebrate the possibilities that lie within these changes and play down issues of uneven development and the relationship between core and peripheral workers within the social formation".

Ashton and Felstead's (1999) survey of skill trends in Britain presents a more realistic picture. They found that "on average, better qualifications are required to get jobs and carry them out" and that "jobs take longer to train for and take longer to learn to do well". (p.69) They argue, however, that despite evidence of upskilling for young and mature workers alike, there is a "deficiency of employer demand" and so "underused...human capital resources". (ibid) Their data reveals that 3 out of 10 graduates in 1997 were in jobs for which a degree was not an entry requirement, a situation largely unchanged since 1986. In addition, one in five people reported that no qualification was required for their current job. Keep (1999) argues that the lack of demand by employers for skilled employees reflects the fact that only a small number of

sectors in the UK actually need high skills, whilst the rest are stuck in a low-skills equilibrium (see also Keep and Mayhew, 1999). Furthermore, Keep asserts that: The high trust, high involvement, high skills, high performance workplace will remain confined to a relatively small number of firms, mainly to be found in those sectors and industries most exposed to international competition. For the rest, various forms of low trust, low involvement, low skills work organisation based on Taylorism will continue to flourish. (ibid, p.343)

As always, the gap between rhetoric and reality is a significant one. Whilst policymakers construct education and training policies wearing spectacles tinted by the glow of the high skills economy, they ignore the needs of all those people confined to the more mundane sectors.

The impact of the service sector

Lipsig-Mumme (1997, p.109) reminds us that since the early 1970s "most of the developed countries of Europe and North America, Australia and New Zealand, have been transformed from industrial to service economies". One of the consequences of the massive expansion of the service sector in developed countries has been the growth in part-time and full-time jobs available to young people. Shops, restaurants, fast-food outlets, garages and leisure centres are now open every day of the year, servicing the needs of their customers round the clock. In the United Kingdom (UK), teenagers now make up a significant part of the workforce in the service economy. The extent of their involvement has meant that the concept of the full-time student now needs to be reappraised as the majority of 16-18 year olds studying 'full-time' in schools and colleges are spending at least as much time working as they are attending classes (see Lucas and Lammont, 1998; Huddleston and Unwin, 1997).

The availability of service sector jobs is also affecting young people's employment aspirations. Service sector employers can offer flexible hours, the possibility of working long shifts to earn extra money, and employment close to home. And, employers will often demand little in the way of prior experience or qualifications. For a teenager concerned to earn just enough money to cover their social life and mobile phone bills, such jobs are very attractive. That attraction may, in turn, lead to a decision to stay with a job which offers few long-term prospects but in which the young person feels safe.

Part of the attraction of the service sector for young people is also to do with the ways in which they lead their lives. Young people play the dual role of consumers and workers in the service sector. The phenomenal growth in places for young people to eat, drink, dance and exercise has been fuelled by their access to spare cash (from parents where both mother and father are working, and from part-time jobs) and by their increasing freedom to spend time outside the home. Young people are still, of course, subject to the restrictions which class, race and gender place on freedom, but, in the main, they engage in extensive social activity. At the start of a new century, they are at the centre of what McDonald (1997, p.69) has called "the emergence of a cultural model structured around mobilisation of the personality, whether it be in the context of work or leisure".

In their study of workplace learning in the UK, Stern and Sommerlad (1999, p.23) found that the hospitality and catering industry "well exemplifies a sector where the scope for workplace learning is limited, beyond responding to immediate pressures for customer care programmes". The retail sector also places a high priority on 'customer care' training, though Raper et al (1997) have found that intense competition between retailers has led to an increasing emphasis on giving employees training in technical product knowledge. Given that service

sector workplaces span a huge range from the smallest corner shop to a multi-national five-star hotel chain, all kinds of jobs will be available, from the barely skilled to highly skilled. The point for this paper, however, is that many of the jobs available to young people will be at the level which require little beyond the ability to 'please' the customer. Lipsig-Mumme (1997, p.110) argues that the jobs in the service sector are not, necessarily, all "bad", but that what matters is "the ability of strong unions and government policy to protect against the spiralling down of conditions".

Retailing and hotel and catering comprise two of the biggest sectors for the Modern Apprenticeship (MA), the UK's government-funded training programme introduced in 1994 and open to 16-25 year olds. Some 30,000 young people have taken up apprenticeships in retailing, and 25,000 in hotel and catering. (DfEE, 2000a) The service sector is, therefore, not only a significant provider of part-time employment for young people, it is also of prime importance to the government's flagship youth training programme. Yet despite the fact that service sector employers appear to have embraced the MA by recruiting so many young people, this sector, out of the 84 which operate the MA, has so far shown the worst record for completion and achievement. Data for the end of 1999, shows that only 12% of apprentices in retail and 14% in hotel and catering had left the scheme having completed the required National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at Level 3. It should be said that completion and achievement rates on the MA are a matter of serious concern across all sectors, but the service sector figures are by far the worst. The next lowest rate of achievement for NVQ Level 3 occurs in the health and social care (20%), whilst the highest rates occur in the travel service (50%), construction (46%), the motor industry (43%) and engineering manufacture (39%). (DfEE, 2000a)

Choosing a work-based route

Significant numbers of young people in the UK opt for and benefit from continuing their education via a work-based, rather than a full-time education route. Those who do often speak of how combining work with the chance to train for a nationally recognised qualification has given them the "chance to shine", to show talent and capability hidden in their school days (see Unwin and Wellington, 1995). Moving from education to employment can also, however, be precarious, channelling young people into dead-end jobs. There is a wealth of literature on the struggle to establish a quality work-based route in the UK (see Unwin, 1997; Evans et al, 1997). At the heart of the struggle is a continued reluctance by governments to force employers to change their attitudes and take seriously the key issues of workplace organisation, training and learning, and long-term planning. The continued reliance on voluntarism has allowed employers to benefit from a host of government-funded youth training schemes without having to show any commitment to or even pretence in adopting new practices. In addition, the severe weakening of trades unions in the UK since the first Thatcher government came to power in 1979, has meant that many young people work in companies where no union exists. This is particularly true for the hotel and catering and retail sectors where trades unions represent only one in ten employees (see Furlong and Cartmel, 1997).

If a visitor to the UK wanted to observe vocational education and the work-based route in action, it would be difficult to know what to show them, for there is no such thing as a typical vocational experience. The MA is no exception, although on the surface it might seem to be breaking the mould. All apprentices are required to work towards an NVQ Level 3 and most frameworks also require apprentices to achieve Key Skills, though the levels vary from sector to sector. National Training Organisations (NTOs) are charged with developing the MA

frameworks for their sector, subject to the approval of the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). In his speech to the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) in February this year, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced some welcome improvements to the Modern Apprenticeship (MA), including a specified period of off-the-job learning in colleges or with other training providers. (FEFC, 2000)

The expansion of the MA, from a programme initially available in 14 sectors, could be seen as something to celebrate in that young people can now access Level 3 training in a wide range of public and private sector settings. In letting "a 1000 flowers bloom", the DfEE could be said to have promoted inclusiveness. The problem, however, is that many of the flowers in the apprenticeship garden are in need of serious attention.

There are several reasons why it would be hard to find a 'typical' apprentice on a 'typical' MA. Apprentices can range in age from 16 to 25, and can be employed by employers as small as a corner shop and as large as a multi-national company. They might be paid as little as the government training allowance (£40 per week) to approaching £200 per week. They might be the only apprentice, or indeed young person, in their place of work, or they could be one of several dozen apprentices spread throughout a company. They may have been subject to rigorous entry requirements policed by an employer (minimum 5 GCSEs at grades A-C, psychometric testing, lengthy interview) or have been 'sent' to an employer by a training provider anxious to meet funding targets and whose apprentices have a poor GCSE record.

The only feature of the MA which is constant to every framework, regardless of sector, is the requirement to train to Level 3. Beyond that, NTOs can decide whether they want to include further qualifications or learning opportunities to add value to the apprenticeship. Hence, an engineering or steel industry MA includes Key Skills in Communication, Application of Number and Information Technology at Level 3, a traditional vocational qualification such as a National Diploma (studied on day-release at an FE college), and a number of single craft or industry-related certificates. Some other frameworks, however, demand little beyond NVQ Level 3, with most if not all of the training being carried out on-the-job. Apprentices differ, therefore, in terms of the access they are given to qualifications and learning opportunities outside the workplace.

In terms of workplace environments, again the apprenticeship experience will be very varied:

- Their employer may have a long tradition of training, including apprenticeship, be very new to the demands of long-term training, or take the view that the training provider should shoulder the main responsibility;
- They may be working alongside a casualised workforce where older workers have little time or motivation to pass on their expertise;
- They may be the only trainee/apprentice on site;
- They may find little integration between their learning activities in the workplace and their off-the-job training programme.

Many of the sectors delivering the MA have no tradition of apprenticeship and their training experience might be largely confined to short-term, task specific activities. Their workplace personnel may not be capable of providing adequate learning and mentoring support. The long-standing problem of inadequately trained trainers in the UK has been well-documented

and continues to hold back progress in workplace learning (see Brown et al 1994; TSC, 1999). At the same time as the UK government has decided to give employers "unprecedented influence over the (post-16) education system" (DfEE, 1999, p.20) through the new Learning and Skills Councils at national and local level, it still abandons large numbers of young people to the mercy of organisations for whom learning is either a dirty or a mysterious word, or where training is still seen as a short-term fix.

Towards a contemporary apprenticeship

As part of the UK's lifelong learning agenda, much more attention has to be given to the role of the workplace. This paper is concerned with young workers, but a recent report from the National Skills Task Force also highlighted the serious problems which older workers face in gaining access to training and qualifications (see NSTF, 2000). Although the report found that UK employers match the European average in providing 10.5 hours of training per thousand working hours, the content and delivery of that training falls below the quality of that offered in other countries; for example, across the European Union (EU), training was split equally between on and off-the-job activity apart from in the UK where 63% of the training was conducted within the workplace. In addition, whereas in Germany (25%) and France (45%), a significant proportion of training in manufacturing concentrated on production techniques, in the UK this was as low as 8%.

As well as holding back the individual, the lack of opportunity for workplace learning for the older worker also puts a significant constraint on the development of a genuine *community of practice* in which the older worker plays a crucial role. Lave and Wenger (1991) have shown how the interplay between older and younger workers is common to models of apprenticeship that exist in many diverse cultural and occupational settings. Alison Fuller and I have described how:

The apprentice's motivation to learn is stimulated by recognition of the gap between themselves and their more knowledgeable and skilful colleagues and through awareness that increased learning brings benefits in terms of the development of adult identity associated with occupational status. (Fuller and Unwin, 1999, p.151)

Research by Eraut et al (1998, p.48) has shown the importance of informal learning in the workplace and highlighted that knowledge is "held by individuals" from whom other people need to learn. They also argue that mentoring is an important part of ensuring that this informal learning is effective. It is perhaps surprising, therefore, to discover that not all the Modern Apprenticeship frameworks stipulate the need for each apprentice to have a mentor in the workplace. Even among those that do acknowledge the mentoring role, there is no consensus as to who should carry this out (e.g. line manager, supervisor, NVQ assessor) nor what the role entails. (QPID, 2000)

Designing a contemporary model of apprenticeship has to be done within the context of the needs and realities of today's workplace, but that design should also ensure that every apprentice will have access to a core entitlement. As we saw earlier, an apprentice on the MA only has access to the possibility of training to NVQ Level 3.

The notion of a core entitlement begs a number of questions which need careful thought:

- Should the work-based route be restricted to certain sectors?

- Do the current MA frameworks offer a challenging diet or a narrow, highly job-specific training?
- Should the MA be restricted to certain employers?
- Should the MA be restricted to employers with trained trainers and mentors?
- Could groupings of employers be formed to 'share' apprentices?
- Are all colleges and training providers equipped with adequately trained staff and the resources to provide high quality vocational education?
- How might young people be brought together to ensure they benefit from communal learning?
- Who should take overall responsibility for ensuring the young person progresses from one level to the next and can transfer their learning from one employer to another?

Many of the occupational sectors which are allowed to run MAs are changing in terms of their working practices, skill requirements and job descriptions. Some are so new that employees may find they are required from the start to be hybrids, their title changing from week to week. Having an occupational identity is very important to young people's sense of worth and carries status in the adult community. We need to be sure that all sectors understand this. If young people are to learn effectively at work, they need some anchors, something to make them feel secure for the time they are training. They need to hear how the sector has developed and, if it is particularly new, where it emerged from and where it might be going. In other words, young people need to learn how to talk about the work they do, to feel part of an occupational community. James (1997, p.303) reminds us that many critics are now arguing the opposite. He summarises the views of social commentators and social theorists alike who argue that, "In a world that emphasises mobility, constant retraining and flexibility, one's particular vocation is less and less taken to be inextricably bound up with one's identity". Instead, James argues for caution and a careful re-consideration of the meaning of work:

...across the range of social relations from its immediate life-world setting, including its eco-regional constraints, to its place within a local, national and global economy. An alternative economy and culture of work will have to find ways of drawing connections across these extensions of space. More importantly, it will have to envision ways of finding a balance between more and less abstract ontologies of labour, and between more and less abstract ways of relating to others in reproducing the conditions of life. (ibid, pp.307-308)

Given the close relationship which many UK teenagers have with the world of work through part-time jobs and their awareness of the breakdown of the concept of "a job for life", it will be important to study on a longitudinal basis how young people conceptualise the meaning of work and their relationship to it.

I have argued elsewhere that a key feature of traditional apprenticeship programmes was their sense of community (see Fuller and Unwin, 1999). Clearly, creating an apprenticeship community was easier in the days when companies had large training schools with sporting and social facilities, and when colleges were full of apprentices on day-release courses. A mandatory requirement to off-the-job training would be a major step forward in helping to foster a communal identity for the MA and should be a key feature of the apprentice's core entitlement. Colleges are in the best position to create communal learning opportunities for apprentices and with increased funding they could build on their traditional off-the-job training role to offer a range of other services. Such services would include developing detailed vocational education and training plans for every apprentice and provision for improving basic skills. By basic skills, I do not mean *Key Skills* which comprise, in Green's (1997, p.100)

analysis, "an impoverished form of general education" and to my mind are a sorry substitute for the development of a substantive and generic vocational education curriculum. Special provision for those apprentices in workplaces with limited opportunities would also need to be designed, again as a way of meeting the core entitlement.

The development of this core entitlement would help foster communities of practice in the four interrelated ways which Alison Fuller and I (building on the ideas of Lave and Wenger) have argued are essential for a contemporary apprenticeship:

- Pedagogical - a social theory of learning in which young learners (newcomers) are conceptualised as 'legitimate peripheral participants' who learn by participating first peripherally and gradually more fully in communities of practitioners;
- Occupational - apprenticeship functions to initiate the individual into an occupational community, defined by the solidarity formed around shared knowledge, competence and skills, values, customs and habits;
- Locational - where apprenticeships are made available to significant numbers of young people by local employers, apprenticeship becomes part of the life of the wider community;
- Social - the perceived success/reputation of the employer influences the extent to which the local community sees those apprenticeships as an important element of the community's infrastructure and social relations. (Fuller and Unwin, 1997, pp.151-152)

Conclusion

Much of the policy debate and research literature surrounding lifelong learning has focused on the needs of mature people. In the UK, where it has been estimated that over 20% of the adult population still has very low literacy and numeracy skills, such an emphasis would seem to be justified (see Moser, 1999). We must, however, also be concerned about the lifelong learning prospects of young people, many of whom may find themselves in workplaces which do little to enhance their knowledge and skills. We must also be aware of this paradox; many young people enjoy moving into the workplace because it provides an environment in which they can demonstrate talent and capability unrecognised and under-utilised in school. The workplace, therefore, is vitally important as a site for developing young people to the point where they can reach their full potential.

A major problem is that, in the UK, the low-skills equilibrium, first identified so forcefully by Finegold and Soskice (1988), still stalks the corridors of too many workplaces. Keep and Mayhew (1999, p.11) argue that "Far from seeking an autonomous work-force of polyvalent knowledge workers to whom high levels of discretion have been delegated in order to produce high-spec, customised goods and services, many organisations continue to need workers to perform narrowly specified, closely supervised, repetitive tasks, in an environment where the work has been organised and the job designed in order to allow minimal discretion". Policymakers need, therefore, to remove the rose-tinted spectacles and consider how to intervene to ensure that all young people have access to as many learning opportunities as possible. On the best of the Modern Apprenticeship programmes, this will mean access to a range of traditional, knowledge-based qualifications studied off-the-job, as well as access to

competence-based NVQs assessed in the workplace. It will also mean being employed by a company with trained trainers and workplace personnel accustomed to passing on their expertise, and with managers keen to encourage young people to make the most of their potential. Many apprentices, and other young workers, will not have immediate access to such opportunities.

Evans (1995, p.20) points out that, "Young adults may be caught in disjunctions and contradictions of policies which do not recognise the interplay of the private and public domains and are based on invalid assumptions about common characteristics and needs of age ranges". The latest government promotional leaflet for the Modern Apprenticeship continues, however, to treat young people and employers as homogeneous entities and to commit the sin of "celebrating possibilities" against which Avis (1997) argued at the start of this paper. The leaflet boldly states:

Young people must have access to the training that they deserve. Employers need more and more highly skilled employees. That's why we have set ambitious targets to ensure that all young people complete their training and that employers fully benefit from their investment." (DfEE, 2000b)

References

- Avis, J. (1995) Post-compulsory education: curricular forms, modernisation and social difference, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 5:1, pp.57-75.
- Bentley, T. (2000) Learning for a creative age, in *Education Futures*, London: Royal Society of Arts/Design Council.
- Brown, A., Evans, K., Blackman, S. and Germon, S. (1994) *Key Workers: Technical and Training Mastery in the Workplace*, Bournemouth: Hyde.
- DfEE (2000a) Modern Apprenticeship Database, Sheffield: Department for Education and Employment.
- DfEE (2000b) Vocational Education and Training: A Framework for the Future, Nottingham: Department for Education and Employment.
- Evans, K., Hodkinson, P., Keep, E., Maguire, M., Rainbird, H., Raffe, D., Senker, P. and Unwin, L. (1997) *Working to Learn*, London: Institute of Personnel and Development.
- Evans, K. (1995) Competence and citizenship: Towards a complementary model, *British Journal of Education and Work*, 8:2, pp.14-27.
- Eraut, M., Alderton, J., Cole, G. and Senker, P. (1999) Learning from other people at work, in Coffield, F. (ed) *Learning at Work*, Bristol: The Policy Press.
- FEFC (2000) David Blunkett's speech to FEFC, Coventry, February.
- Felstead, A. and Unwin, L. (1999) *Funding Systems and their Impact on Skills*, Skills Task Force Research Paper 11, DfEE.
- Finegold, D. and Soskice, D. (1988) The Failure of Training in Britain: Analysis and Prescription, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 4:3, pp.21-53.
- Fuller, A. and Unwin, L. (1999) A sense of belonging: the relationship between community and apprenticeship, in Ainley, P. and Rainbird, H. (eds) *Apprenticeship: towards a new paradigm for learning*, London: Kogan Page.
- Furlong, A. and Cartmel, F. (1997) *Young People and Social Change*, Buckingham, Open University Press.
- Green, A. (1997) Core Skills, General Education and Unification in Post-16 Education, in Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (eds) *Dealing and Beyond*, London: Kogan Page.

- Huddleston, P. and Unwin, L. (1997) Skills, stakeholders and star-gazing: the relationship between education, training and the economy, in Stanton, G. and Richardson, W. (eds) *Qualifications for the future*, FEDA Strategic Research Vol.2, London: Further Education Development Agency.
- James, P. (1997) The ontology of work: alternatives for the future, in James, P., Veit, W.F., and Wright, S. (eds) *Work of the Future*, London: Allen and Unwin.
- Keep, E. (1999) UK's VET Policy and the 'Third Way': following a high skills trajectory or running up a dead end street?, *Journal of Education and Work*, 12:3, pp.323-346.
- Keep, E. and Mayhew, K. (1999) The Assessment: Knowledge, Skills and Competitiveness, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 15:1, pp. 1-15.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lipsig-Mumme, C. (1997) The politics of the new service economy, in James, P., Veit, W.F., and Wright, S. (eds) *Work of the Future*, London: Allen and Unwin.
- Lucas, R. and Lammont, N. (1998) Combining Work and Study: an empirical study of full-time students in school, college and university, *Journal of Education and Work*, 11:1, pp.41-56.
- McDonald, K. (1997) Social transformations: new problems, new possibilities, in James, P., Veit, W.F., and Wright, S. (eds) *Work of the Future*, London: Allen and Unwin.
- Moser, Sir Claus (1999) *Improving Literacy and Numeracy: A Fresh Start*, the report of the working group chaired by Sir Claus Moser, London: DfEE.
- NSTF (2000) *Tackling the adult skills gap: upskilling adults and the role of workplace learning, Third Report of the National Skills Task Force*, Sudbury: Department for Education and Employment.
- QPID (2000) *Mentoring for Work Based Training*, QPID Study Report No.81, Sheffield, QPID/DfEE.
- Raper, P.D., Ashton, D., Felstead, A. and Storey, J. (1997) Towards the learning organisation: explaining current trends in training practice in the UK, *International Journal of Training and Development*, 1:1.
- Stern, E. and Sommerlad, E. (1999) *Workplace Learning, Culture and Performance*, London: Institute of Personnel and Development.
- TSC (1999) *Reaching New Standards: Annual Report of the Chief Inspector 1998-1999*, London: Training Standards Council.
- Unwin, L. (1997) Reforming the work-based route: problems and potential for change, in Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (eds) *Dearing and Beyond*, London: Kogan Page.