Non-hierarchically anarchic

The group does not function as a hierarchically ordered corporation but a kind of organic cooperative. The main source of intervention is the articulation of need rather than the command to action.

Gleefully Infectious

This is the aesthetic power of showing and not telling. The infectiousness of chuckling into laughter might be a way of describing the evocative force

Being enriched by less than perfect performance but aiming at quality

This is difficult. The person performing has a prevenient affirmation which s/he begins with and does not have to earn. The group is hoping something good and enjoyable will come but it is not punitive if that does not happen. There are no reccriminations but outstanding performances get a huge response which is noticeably different from the more

encouraging applause for less stunning offerings.

Conclusion

Lave and Wenger’s ideas of ‘communities of practice’ have been useful in the more analytical approach which uncovers the social side of learning and the concern with making something and making it well. What is interesting here is where the thing being made is an almost tangible social reality but very different from a fabricated item in a factory. The phenomenological style of the brief inquiry here provides a kind of detailed existential validation for the insight of human communities of practice and their power and reach.

References

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Developing resilient workers: Learning across working life

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As the requirements for work continue to change, influenced by such factors as the growing use of technology and globalisation, workers’ employability increasingly depends on their ability to continue to adapt to these changes. Alongside those influences are social changes that are also transforming workforces and workplaces, including longer working lives and increased longevity and a growing reliance on experienced workers since the number of younger entrants to working life cannot keep pace with overall demands.

All these imperatives lead to the need for resilient workers, capable of learning adaptively across lengthening working lives. While some of that learning will occur through accredited courses, much of it arises through everyday learning in the circumstances of practice and as an outcome of workers’ own endeavours as active (agentic) learners and through their interactions with others, in and out of the workplace. Drawing on interviews with 51 workers, this paper discusses how learning and training can help develop resilient workers and hence sustain their employability.

Resilient workers

There are growing requirements for workers to sustain their employability across lengthening working lives as the nature of work (i.e. occupations) and its requirements in the particular places people are employed change, sometimes in quite dramatic ways. According to Hall (2006: 22), major workplace developments include the growth in knowledge work, the changing nature of labour supply and demand, changes to product and service markets, the
changing role of governments and of the community sector, organisational restructuring, and technological change. 'The complex interplay of these forces,' he says, 'will continue to result in different outcomes for different kinds of workers, in different industries, markets, occupations, professions and organisations.' Consequently, to sustain employability, workers need to become resilient, that is, to have and develop the capacities to adapt to those changes.

'Employability' is a contested term, but its usage in this paper is based on Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth's (2004: 17) definition, building on the work of Ashford and Taylor (1990), that it 'embodies (pro)active adaptability in the work domain'. In the context of this paper, that adaptability is examined in terms of workers' engagement in learning and training. The extent of that engagement is related to their motivation and willingness to do so, because in contemporary times much of workers' resilience will likely need to be a product of individuals' agency and efforts as they identify, evaluate and act on learning opportunities that support their needs and aspirations in and through work and associated education and training provisions. In these terms, resilience can be seen as a personal capacity, a responsibility, to successfully manage and negotiate change and its accompanying risk and stress in order to secure beneficial outcomes of sustained employability and meaningful work.

In confirmation of this individualist perspective of resilience, Ungar (2012: 13) notes that 'those who are disadvantaged are expected to exercise personal agency in regard to accessing opportunities in their environments in order to increase their psychological functioning'. Ollier-Malaterre (2009: 42) also observes that discussion of resilience in workplaces has tended to be in terms of individual response to environmental factors. Similarly, Luthans (2002: 702) defines resilience as the ‘positive psychological capacity to rebound or ‘bounce back’ from adversity, uncertainty, conflict, failure or even positive change, progress and increased responsibility’. One way in which workers can demonstrate their capacity to respond to workplace change, whether adverse or positive, is through learning and training, in order to maintain their employability.

Nevertheless, opportunities to access and secure learning that supports continuing employability are not guaranteed by individuals' efforts but are subject to the impact of numerous contextual and situational factors (e.g., economic, cultural, organisational, regulatory, etc.) that constitute the social conditions of work. Billett (2006) notes a range of socio-structural changes that characterise contemporary work and mediate individuals' engagement in work. These include changes that have shaped the availability of work, the composition of the paid workforce, the situational affordances and constraints that shape workers' participation and what constitutes performance requirements as the tasks and conditions that define occupational practice are themselves transforming.

In addition, learning opportunities that sustain employability may be limited by government workforce development priorities that, despite their seeming large scale investment in training provision, predominantly and primarily target youth and early school leavers, those disadvantaged by disability and those experiencing long term unemployment (DEEWR 2012). Such investment and support are necessary, but the government focus remains on labour market entry level training rather than the kind of learning support that builds resilience in an existing workforce subject to increasing levels of change.

In the Australian context, it is postulated that past government policies and industry failure to invest in the kinds of continuing education and training that sustain employability has led to the national skills shortages currently threatening the national economy. In these terms, resilience is a socio-cultural practice, an interactive process demanding awareness and accommodation of the social factors that shape workers' participation and success in and through work and learning. Ungar (2012) refers to such a perspective on resilience as ecological because it acknowledges and takes account of the social, and here, limiting, factors that shape individuals' capacities to successfully respond to disadvantage. So, workforce resilience and the positive development by which it is characterised are hindered when access to the learning that sustains employability is limited or constrained by social priorities and institutional agenda that do not sufficiently support its enactment. These factors extend to the degree by which opportunities are provided for individuals in and through work.

Yet, most workers will likely need to continue to learn and, thereby, develop their employability outside of such social and institutionally supported arrangements and provisions. That is, through their own learning endeavours and through interactions with others, workers will, both intentionally and incidentally, bring together the resources that advance their personal aspirations (however modest or incomplete) in and
out of working life. Smith (2011) describes this ‘bringing together’ as workers’ transaction of their vocational practice. Workers, through their enactment of the tasks and relationships comprising the joint activity that is their work, bring together in personal practice, all the mediating influences that shape their experience.

In discussing the development of resilient and adaptive workers, this paper draws on the findings of a national project examining how workers develop the capacities they need to sustain their employability across lengthening working lives (Billett et al 2011). Some tentative findings from the first data collection phase of the project are reported here. Through interviews with 51 workers in the community services and health and the transport and logistics industries, the project gathered data on how these informants i) perceived the importance of ongoing learning; ii) perceived the relative effectiveness of different sources of learning; and iii) preferred to be supported in their learning. While the research did not set out to identify resilience as a capacity in workers, their responses indicate that workers see learning and training as a way of responding to the sorts of changes identified by Hall (2006). In this way, their responses reflect Fugate et al’s (2004: 17) conception of employability as ‘proactive adaptability in the work domain’.

In overview, very consistently, guidance at work augmented with practice and opportunities for accessing these experiences and forms of support were consistently identified by workers in community services and health and in transport and logistics as their most significant sources of learning. They reported a preference for learning through everyday work activities in the circumstances of work and with support for that work and learning coming from co-workers, supervisors or more expert others, such as trainers from Registered Training Organisations. Whilst much of this learning arose from their participation in everyday work activities, it is evident that these kinds of self-initiated and directed learning experiences on their own are insufficient. What these workers preferred was support from more experienced workers and external experts to assist them learn what they might not be able to achieve on their own.

While the data might be discussed within a range of workplace learning literature, the focus of this paper is on the relationship between workers’ ongoing learning and training and the development of resilience. It therefore first presents workers’ responses as reactions to the workplace changes they perceive, followed by a discussion of possible ways of supporting their learning as part of the process of developing resilience across their working lives.

**Securing resilience and adaptability through education and training**

The workers interviewed were well established in their current work. These interviews comprised gathering accounts of the personal learning and training experiences of workers and managers from two distinct industry sectors from regional and urban areas in south-east Australia: i) transport and logistics and ii) health and community services. A total of 71 people from 13 organisations (six in aged care and disabled care from health and community services, and seven from transport and logistics) were interviewed. Of those interviewed, 51 identified as employees or ‘workers’ and 20 as managers or training coordinators.

The data and findings reported here are those of the 51 workers, who discussed their learning and training experiences in relation to three aspects of their work: i) learning prior to their current work, ii) learning during and pertaining to their current work and iii) their learning preferences and aspirations for future work. These experiences were further related to considerations of how and to what effect their learning was influenced by the workplace, by the education and training providers they encountered, and by their perceptions of other external imperatives that shaped their work and learning experience. Interviews were 30-40 minutes long and semi-structured, that is, based on specific open ended questions and tick box responses. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. All transcriptions were de-identified and informants assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

The interview data consistently provide instances of worker resilience through learning. Learning through authentic work activities was consistently found to offer adaptive learning opportunities that seem well aligned with enhancing resilience and sustaining employability, in three particular circumstances: i) that the activities are conducted in the actualities of work, ii) that they are supported by experienced and cooperative others and employers and iii) that they comprise a developmental pathway that acknowledges and rewards increasing expertise.

A case in point is that of Brianna, an aged care worker. Her work, like the health and community services sector generally, is highly regulated and characterised by an increasing emphasis on employees holding accredited qualifications and engaging in regular training interventions that satisfy compliance requirements. She expects and
accepts that ongoing training is a fundamental aspect of her work and employability. Yet, in interview she reported how difficult learning can be when it is not undertaken and supported at work. She states:

‘For this particular job, everything changes every day so … unless you're doing it on the job, there's no way of learning this position. … it would have been a lot easier to learn the job if I had been shown by somebody, especially somebody who’s done it.’

In the absence of direct support, Brianna does what transport workers Gary and Barney must do. Gary states, ‘You just had to get in and do it yourself’, and Barney confirms, ‘I have the basic knowledge and knowhow and you learn each day as you’re doing it.’ In these seemingly obvious ways, these workers enact (within the difficulties experienced) the learning necessary to their work through a reliance on their personal capacities to accept challenge, deploy previously developed skills and use the available resources to realise a relatively proximate future of self-competence. Learning in the immediate circumstances of work, that is, on the job, is resilience building. The salience of this is emphasised repeatedly throughout the interviews undertaken with all workers in the project. Geoff, a transport worker summarises the significance and necessity of learning for work in the circumstances of work when he states:

‘… [i]n the truck driving game you've got to do it at work. You really do because online is no good to you. … my main reason for it is quite simple, you are not on the road. The classroom is not going to do the job. … Well, you're not at school, you're out there in an environment which has got nothing to do with the classroom to start with.’

Across all the 51 informants interviewed in the first phase of the project, the most highly ranked contributor to learning for both current and continuing employability was the workplace. In terms of workers learning individually, that is, without direct support beyond the immediate practice based requirements of ‘do it yourself’, 39 noted it as the basis of their initial occupational learning and 40 noted it as the basis of their continuing learning. Clearly, workers both need to and are expected to enact their personal resilience in securing current employment and sustaining their employability. At issue here is the effectiveness of this approach to education and training provision given the often unsupported work conditions in which it is enacted. This issue becomes apparent when workers’ preferred learning experiences are taken into account.

The prominence of the workplace as the most effective and worker-preferred site of learning for sustained employability is heightened when the levels of support afforded workers includes experienced co-workers and guidance by experts. The three most frequently reported actual forms of learning support were those associated with direct engagement with a co-worker (84%), workplace expert (63%), or trainer in a classroom (61%). A clear emphasis throughout these reports is workers needing and wanting to directly engage in learning with someone who knows more than they do and is able to direct their learning ‘properly’. Noela, a health care worker, describes her learning experience favourably and summarises: ‘I have a buddy shift, somebody else teaching me and how to do things well’. Barney, a transport worker, confirms the significance of supportive co-workers as the source of effective guidance for work performance: ‘There’s blokes here and they have always pointed out the wrongs and rights’.

The performance and development benefits of supportive co-workers are well documented in the workplace learning literature. However, the well intentioned support of colleagues cannot always be relied on to identify and guide adaptive learning. Geoff noted the limitations of the workplace and how the intervention of less-informed others and work procedures that constrained access to new activities were hindrances to learning experiences that support sustained employability. Noela, Barney and Geoff’s reports of their learning experiences highlight the socio-cultural processes and interactions that shape resilience and how workers are both supported and constrained by structurally determined opportunities to exercise their capacities and aspirations in work. This is clearly illustrated when learning in the workplace is augmented by the provision of facilitated education and training opportunities.

The three most frequent forms of preferred learning support were reported as being: i) working and sharing with another person on the job (77% of respondents), ii) direct teaching by a workplace expert (67%), and iii) group activities in a classroom, guided by a training or facilitator (55%). Overall, workers in both the health and community services and transport and logistics sectors report learning and wanting to learn with others, preferably supportive experts, at and through work. All of these processes indicate that the workers are taking responsibility for their own learning in responding to the changes currently occurring in their industries, in ways that Luthans (2007) characterises as resilience.
Practices like those noted above, together with others such as mentoring, coaching and supplier-sponsored training, comprise the most common and familiar kinds of learning opportunities experienced in and for work. What is significant about the majority of this learning is its focus on the immediate tasks that confront workers as the basis of a stronger future orientation. Bianca, a worker in the highly training-oriented health care sector states: ‘We’re constantly doing training to update our skills like that. If I’m eager to upskill they’ll send me off to a computer course, or a management course, things like that’. Bianca acknowledges the strong personal and organisational connection between updating for immediate workplace performance and upskilling for future tasks and roles, i.e. developing resilience in a complex working environment.

At the same time, these workers report a range of imperatives influencing their learning needs for desired future outcomes. Analysis of the interview data suggests four key imperatives that will continue to demand worker resilience: i) mandated or regulated requirements, ii) workplace specific needs, iii) new equipment or tasks demands, and iv) personal needs. The demands of regulatory requirements are clearly indicated by the importance of accredited qualifications for sustained employability and as key requirements for employment in both of these industry sectors. Stringent workplace health and safety demands and other compliance requirements are now standard aspects of industry sectors such as health and community services and transport and logistics. Without appropriate licences and certificate qualifications, individuals’ employment in these sectors is virtually impossible.

This is the case at both entry levels and also increasingly the case as accredited professional development and skills currency requirements become routine. Whereas Breena, above, notes the seeming ease of bi-monthly certified training that ensures her ongoing awareness of performance and compliance requirements, other workers report the less desirable and less supported requirements of needing to access the internet, employer newsletters, trade and product supplier brochures to secure information related to the changes influencing their work. In other words, developing resilience in order to respond to future changes may require a variety of learning responses.

The fourth imperative identified in the data is that of workers’ personal needs. Such needs are as diverse as the workers themselves, but remain central to their wanting to ensure high levels of performance, through work relevant and expert guided training that secures advancement. Here, the primary focus is on secure and sustained employability and how that is most effectively personally enacted and socially supported as the basis of enhancing worker resilience. The data suggest enhanced resilience to the changes influencing the 51 workers in this project is best supported by learning that meets personal needs through enabling workers to learn together in shared workplace supported arrangements that are sufficiently guided by expertise that is relevant to the immediate circumstances of work (and potentially for future needs) and lead to accreditation in the form of certificate qualifications.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the highly credential-focused labour market that characterises work in the health and community services sector (projected to generate 25% of national employment growth to 2016: DEEWR 2011) and the transport and logistics sector (projected to generate 6% of national employment growth to 2016: DEEWR 2011), meeting personal needs which mobilises worker resilience to secure and sustain employability is enabled by educational provision that follows a developmental pathway. This pathway should be characterised by a trajectory through orientation to occupational tasks, followed by engagement in the circumstances of practice, through to specialization and further development over time, and be punctuated by qualification awards that document the quantity and quality of learning undertaken in progressing this trajectory. In this way, resilience is a socio-personal practice that may well be enhanced through its recognition and accomplishment within a national education and training provision directed to such a purpose.

**Implications for provisions of learning support**

Clearly, the development of resilient workers comprises a personal, workplace and national imperative. Workers need to progress their employability in times characterised by changes in their workplaces and that are both welcome (e.g., individual opportunities for advancement at work) and unwelcome (e.g., forced redundancies and company closures). Equally, the quality of life and opportunity to work are interdependently based in a strong national economy buoyed by supportive social infrastructure that secures industry investment and an open labour market. Within such a context, resilience is more than a personal trait or characteristic that tempers the adverse effects of stress and risk generated by unwelcome change. It is a relational accomplishment, enacted and developed through
interactive processes shaped by individuals’ engagement in the circumstances of their practice. Equally, learning is more than a personal process of constructing knowledge. Like resilience, learning is a relational accomplishment, the shared socio-personal practice of generating and accommodating change.

Learning, therefore, is both an internal and external factor of individuals’ personal resilience. It is internal in the sense that the legacy of successful learning can be attributed to individuals’ personal efforts, decisions and priorities as they are enacted through agentic action. Individuals can be said to choose what they find interesting, challenging and important and, thereby, how much of themselves they will invest in their experiences. It is external in the sense that such agency is mediated by socio-cultural circumstance over which individuals have little to no control (e.g. workplace affordances, changes in employment patterns). Learning experiences are structured by the contexts individuals participate in and the opportunities emergent from that participation. Sometimes contextual structures are constraining, presenting few if any opportunities for individuals to exercise their agency and overcome threats and barriers to their wellbeing and advancement. Equally, contextual structures can be invitational, offering a wealth of opportunity to learn, create and progress.

The national provision of continuing education and training for enhanced worker resilience needs to be cognizant and accommodating of these socio-personal factors. Additionally, as indicated in the data outlined above, education and training provisions that progress from workers’ self-understandings and preferences for learning must be based in authentic work activities that are conducted in the actualities of work, supported by experienced others and employers and enabled by a developmental pathway that acknowledges and rewards increasing expertise. Worker resilience can emerge from education and training provision that accommodates these key elements.

There are a range of implications associated with the establishment of such a provision. Three are briefly noted here as indication of the kinds of models of learning support that could underpin this provision. These implications are in relation to: i) the organisation and provision of appropriate learning experiences at work, ii) developing learner support and iii) developing learner engagement.

First, the emphasis workers come to place on the need of learning experiences being authentic and situated in practice requires a greater consideration when advancing workplaces as sites of legitimate pedagogy and curriculum enactment; (i.e. sites of structured learning). So, how experiences are introduced and made accessible, sequenced and prioritised and then monitored and evaluated needs careful consideration if this continued learning is to be secured. There are also learning design and implementation issues that need to be carefully managed and critically considered within the requirements of specific work practice and policy. The core business of work is production, not learning, and so it is not surprising that workplace managers and owners would not necessarily prioritise learning as a management variable. Yet, this is what is required, not only for reasons of productivity, but also to develop resilient workers, those who will respond positively to emerging needs and changing workplaces.

There is a role here for education and training institutions. Their learning design expertise could be developed beyond training provision to include organisational management and structuring for learning that helps develop resilience in workers. By partnering in this way, with a shared acknowledgement of the need for well organised work practices that accommodate learning for sustained employability at their core, workplaces and training institutions could work together to establish and develop genuine workplace learning culture.

Second, the development of such learning cultures in workplaces through and for work practice requires that workers are not just left to learn wholly independently when faced with tasks that are beyond the scope of their adaptive learning and are, instead, supported to undertake such learning in work. The data indicate workers’ need of direct and individualised learning support in two primary forms; access to and guidance from experts and employer sponsored provision within work. Such support is necessary for numerous reasons, including the fact that much of the knowledge needed for effective work performance is hidden (i.e., not accessible through observation and discovery alone), requires time and practice to build competence, is often directed to future and yet to be broadly enacted practice (e.g., the planned introduction of new equipment and operating procedures) and involves the collaboration of others (e.g., through production cycles and systems, team work, etc.). The complexity of change and the learning required to enact and benefit from these cultures require broad and strategic support that is perceived by the learners as being of this kind. Through such processes, workers are likely to feel more confident
of their capacities and hence more capable of bouncing back from ‘adversity, uncertainty, conflict, failure or even positive change, progress and increased responsibility’ (Luthans, 2002:702).

Third, workers are learners who need to engage fully and willingly in the changes to which they are subject and the changes to which they aspire across their working lives as workplace requirements constantly change. Effective learning is premised on the attitudes and practices that attend engagement in learning experience. Moreover, workplaces are contested sites of enactment. Workers’ personal and vocational goals and the organisational and regulatory goals of their employers and governments may or may not align as motivations and targets for the effort required for effective adaptive learning. The data advanced above suggest that these workers are quite future-oriented and willing and able to expend the effort necessary to secure and sustain their employability within sets of circumstances that support and advance their aspirations. In the words of Ungar (2012: 13), they are able to ‘exercise personal agency in regard to accessing opportunities in their environments’, in this case to take advantage of learning and training opportunities.

However, it seems these workers’ intentional and focused engagement in learning needs more than the alignment of personal and organisational goals and certified acknowledgement of the outcomes of such engagement. Both workers and workplaces will need to be more broadly supported to value learning effort expended for futures that are uncertain and unanticipated. Adaptive learning for employability needs to be more than reactive. Rather, it needs to be based in exploration and the acceptance of challenge and failure as advantageous outcomes of learning and work.

Learning and resilience

This paper has advanced some ideas about learning as the basis of worker resilience within the context of a national need for a stronger focus on education and training provision in order to address the personal needs of workers and the broader social needs of the economy. National productivity and hence the standard of living are reliant to a considerable extent on workers sustaining their employability through successfully and willingly adapting to and being generative of the kinds of changes that increasingly mark contemporary work.

Overall, developing resilient workers is enabled by work that values learning. That value is founded on the integration of workers individually and collectively, the organisations and workplaces within which they work, the education and training institutions that facilitate accredited learning provision and the regulatory bodies that govern that provision. The complexity and intensity of change within contemporary work demands that worker resilience be seen as a social issue and not the sole domain of individual workers who may or may not successfully address the range of demands and stresses their work inevitably brings. Such an approach should lead not only to the development of individual resilient workers able to sustain their employability, but the emergence of a capable and responsive workforce.

References


