Learning and training for sustained employability across working lives

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Abstract

The provision and enactment of continuous learning has become a defining aspect of contemporary work and occupational development. This is because, particularly in countries with advanced industrial economies, the requirements for being and remaining competent at work are constantly changing due to factors such as globalisation, new technologies and organisational restructuring. There is also a trend towards individuals having longer working lives, as ageing populations mean mature-age workers stay longer in the workforce. As a result, workers are continually responding to changing circumstances to sustain their employability across extended working lives. Much of that response comes through learning and training undertaken in quite different ways from the approaches used in entry level preparation for employment. Consequently, lifelong learning and continuing education are becoming an increasingly important phenomenon in these countries, yet require distinct educational provisions. Hence, we need to know more about how it can be effectively organised and enacted.

Within this context, this paper discusses the findings of interviews with Australian workers in two industries: transport and logistics, and health and community services, about their learning experiences and preferences in sustaining their employability. The paper argues that these employees’ work and learning experiences are consistently reported in those interviews as comprising the effective means of continuing work-related learning and training that supports and sustains their employability through the workplace changes and demands they encounter and, hence, across their working lives. Further, the paper considers some of the implications arising from these accounts and suggests that the learning practices and expectations identified establish strong premises for developing integrative models of learning and training provision that are more suited to workers and workplaces in these changing times.

Keywords: Continuing education and training, Employability, Adaptability, Workplace change, Workplace learning.

Work and sustaining employability through continuous learning

There are growing requirements for workers to sustain their employability across lengthening working lives as changes occur in the nature of work, and the very specific and often transformational ways it is enacted. Hall (2006) identified major
forces and sources of workplace change and development as 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,” Hall claimed, “will continue to result in different outcomes for different kinds of workers, in different industries, markets, occupations, professions and organisations” (p. 22). Consequently, workers need to be adaptive, innovative and agentically participative within such changes if they are to successfully maintain the work competence and confidence that underpins their employability.

This paper explores the provision and nature of continuing education and training of workers already in employment, and how their learning is key to their employability. It aims to contribute to understandings about individual workers’ perceptions of their learning in the context of change and the kinds of considerations that underpin better supporting this learning. Here, the term ‘employability’ applies to what Billett (2002, p. 462) describes as maintaining “the currency of individuals’ skills throughout a working life, as workplace practices are transformed over time and the goals for performance at work change”. Employability is a shared accomplishment, established in the contested integration of worker, work and workplace and the range of needs, challenges and aspirations negotiated through this integration. This usage is consistent with Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth’s (2004, p. 17) assertion that employability “embodies (pro)active adaptability in the work domain”. For workers already in employment, that pro-active adaptability involves negotiating opportunity for and access to the resources and support necessary for updating the skills and knowledge needed to maintain and sustain employment and preparation for advancement.

Much of the research literature about adaptability in the workplace relates to individual performance and the cognitive and personality constructs that underlie individuals’ ability to adapt to change (e.g., O’Connell, McNeely, & Hall, 2008; Pulakos, Dorsey, & White, 2006). This paper takes a different approach to adaptability in work. It uses a small-scale study to examine the perceptions of workers already in employment about the role of continuing education and training in helping them maintain their employability.

The analysis of their responses resulted in conclusions about how continuing education and training can best be facilitated and supported to develop learners/workers who are active and agentic participants in the learning process. The data, analysis and conclusions reported here form part of a larger research project that is examining the broad provision of continuing education and training in Australia (see Billett et al., 2011).
Learning and training for sustained employability across working lives

Through interviews with 51 workers in two Australian industries — health and community services and transport and logistics — data were gathered about how they: enacted and evaluated their initial and on-going learning experience; perceived the differences among the kinds and sources of these learning experiences; and preferred to be supported in their learning to sustain employability and secure advancement. To identify effective provision for continuing education and training, workers’ responses were coded in relation to the preferences they expressed for i) learning in the workplace, ii) learning from external educational providers, and iii) learning from other sources. Those categorisations provide a framework for the findings and analysis presented.

In brief, the findings show that guidance at work augmented with practice and opportunities for accessing these experiences and forms of support were consistently identified by the 51 workers as their most significant and effective sources of learning for sustaining their employability. Workers reported a preference for learning through everyday work activities with support coming from co-workers, supervisors and more expert others. The research also identified, however, that self-initiated and directed learning experiences need to be supplemented by support from more experienced workers and external experts to assist them learn what they might not be able to achieve on their own as new work challenges arose.

These findings highlight some considerations necessary to the effective provision and support of work learning and training experiences that sustain employability. Those considerations, which are discussed further in the final section of the paper, include quality assurances of the relevance and authenticity of work learning experience as integral to work (not additional to it), the kinds and levels of learning support afforded workers, and learner engagement where self-directed participation in learning for work is premised on the meaningful valuing of change and the opportunities it can create.

Work, change and learning

A range of socio-structural changes characterise contemporary work and mediate individuals’ engagement in work (Billett, 2006). These include changes in 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.

Further, most 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 (2012) describes this ‘bringing together’ as
negotiation, workers’ transaction of their occupational practice. Workers, through their enactment of the shared tasks and relationships comprising their work, bring together in personal practice all the mediating influences that shape their learning experience.

The range of attitudes and influences affecting ongoing learning is evident in recent Australian workplace research. On one hand, for example, a report on workers in the Australian agrifoods industry found that many were interested only in training that helps them obtain or keep a job, or involves potential promotion (Mills, Bowman, Crean & Ranshaw, 2012). On the other hand, Figgis and Standen (2005) found that in the oil and gas industry, existing skilled workers were generally more confident than entry-level learners and “in a workplace that affords them the opportunities, they effectively take charge of their own learning program” (p. 5).

Billett (2006) has noted the significance of such affordances and their interrelationship with the nature and extent of workers’ engagement. Again, recent research has reinforced that interrelationship in provision of training. Figgis (2009), for instance, identified six trends in training practice: “using authentic learning tasks as the basis for learning; encouraging peer learning; applying e-learning technologies; using the workplace as the primary site for learning and skill development; personalising learning; and devolving support for teaching and learning so that it is close to the practitioner” (p. 3). Booth, Roy, Jenkins, Clayton and Sutcliffe (2005) also addressed this interrelationship through recommendations to training providers that training must be tailored for workers’ needs, is preferably delivered in the workplace, interrelates theory and practice, provides supplementary learner support, and that the structure and pace of learning is appropriate for particular groups of learners. Similarly, Misko (2008) concluded that the key features of successfully integrating learning with work are management support for workers’ learning engagement and the willingness of individual workers to take advantage of the opportunities afforded them.

There are other factors too — for example, the stability of the labour force in a particular industry and, hence, in both employer and employee commitment to training (Bretherton, 2011), and the potential differences between managers’ and workers’ perceptions of the purposes and worth of training (Harris & Simons, 2012). Yu, Bretherton and Schutz (2012) found that for those undertaking low skilled work, there are fewer opportunities to develop higher-level skills than for those in more skilled roles. Their findings indicate that, in general, the more education workers have, the more likely they are to pursue further education and that those in management, technical and administrative roles are more likely to be supported in these pursuits (Billett, 2006; Darrah, 1996).

This brief review shows that researchers are beginning to differentiate between
factors that seem common to most workers in enhancing their continuing education and learning and factors that are more applicable to particular industries and occupations and to workers individually. The picture developing is one of continual workplace change and increasing recognition of the need to ‘manage’ learning for successful and innovative responses to change. The research also shows that within that context of change and the imperatives that drive and direct workers’ learning, workers have additional and different individual motivations and preferences for engaging in learning to maintain their employability, and these are often distinct from those of their managers.

The sorts of guidelines and recommendations emerging from the research noted above raise issues about how generating and responding to change can translate into learning and training for individual workers. Equally, how workers perceive the nature and extent of the work and training affordances (and constraints) that motivate and support (and hinder) them to maintain their employability are salient factors that need highlighting. Such accounts and considerations are necessary bases from which the strategies and policies that comprise the effective provision of continuing education and training can successfully be developed and enacted.

The sample and procedures

The 51 workers interviewed comprised 29 from aged and disabled care facilities in health and community services, and 22 from the transport and logistics industry. The community services and health industry was selected because of the large size of the workforce and its rapid and continuing growth; the transport and logistics industry because of its strategic importance, its employment of high levels of mature-age workers, and its strong small-business profile. Both sectors are significant contributors to current and projected national employment growth (DEEWR, 2011).

Most workers were aged between 20 and 50 years, with more workers aged over 50 in the transport industry. The gender distribution of participants reflected the proportions in the two industries generally: community services and health had a higher number of female workers interviewed (86%), and there were more males (82%) interviewed in the transport and logistics industry. All informants had previous work experience, ranging from one to 25 years, which contributed to the richness of the data about their experiences with continuing education and training, as distinct from entry-level training. Almost one-fifth of the sample had a primary or secondary school certificate as their highest qualification, two-thirds held a vocational certificate, diploma or advanced diploma, and four had a university-level qualification.
The 51 workers participated voluntarily in face to face semi-structured interviews of 30–40 minutes duration, and responded to written questions containing tick boxes. The sections of the interviews and proforma responses reported here focus on how they learnt and preferred to learn for their current job; how they were learning to remain competent and their preferences; how their current learning was supported; and how they would prefer their learning to be assisted. All interviews were transcribed and all transcriptions were de-identified and given pseudonyms.

The data were manually analysed using a strategy that identified major themes, patterns and interrelationships (Gibbs, 2002) to design a coding scheme that would identify the most effective ways of facilitating and supporting continuing education and training for sustained employability. The workers’ responses were subsequently categorised according to the preferences they expressed for means of: i) learning in the workplace, ii) learning from external educational providers, and iii) learning from other sources. Summaries of their responses under those categories are presented and discussed in the next section.

**Learning in the workplace**

In the workplace, approaches to maintaining current employment were shaped by four sets of particular imperatives, which arose from: i) mandated or regulated provisions, ii) workplace specific needs, iii) new equipment or tasks, and iv) personal needs. These imperatives can be captured through phrases such as “you need certification” for the regulated provisions, “this is how we do it here”, for workplace specific needs, “needing to learn how to use this new equipment” when new and unfamiliar equipment and work tasks were encountered and, “for my needs to be fulfilled” referring to the different kinds of personal imperatives which arise for individual workers.

Personal interest and engagement in learning for advancement was also shaped by employer willingness to support access to educational provisions and time off. As Bianca, a transport worker, states:

… well, I’m doing a workshop soon. We’re constantly doing training to update our skills like that. If I’m eager to up skill they’ll send me off to a computer course, or a management course, things like that. Usually, whatever you want there is something available there.

So, it is not just personal interest and engagement, that is likely to support effective ongoing learning, it is also the willingness of the employer to support and sponsor, and also presumably, the effectiveness of any available provisions.
Much of occupational learning is associated with the provision of specific kinds of experiences (e.g., training courses/programs, specific guidance, job rotation, to name a few things). In some instances, it was suggested that training programs and provisions were the key and legitimate means by which workers could learn ‘properly’.

Perhaps the most common reference to learning was as a product of need, the personal expression about the need to learn or be able to do something which the individual cannot do. For instance, Barney, a transport worker, discusses his learning after taking up employment in a road transport company:

*I already have most of my things, I mean you learn something new every day, but yet I have the basic knowledge and knowhow and you learn each day as you’re doing it.*

In terms of processes of learning to sustain current employment, there was a strong and consistent preference for local guidance and support in the circumstances of work. Moreover, some of that work enactment had these qualities. For instance, those engaged in shared or team work seemingly had inbuilt guidance and support, and also the ability for ‘shadowing’ more experienced workers and the opportunity to gradually engage in tasks under the guidance of a more experienced partner. Barney continues:

*.... coming here and working here was a big change for me, not as in driving a vehicle but as in the … freight side of things and knowing produce and what they do at the site. There’s been blokes here and they have always pointed out the wrongs and rights.*

Noela, an aged care worker, has similar supported experiences. She states:

*I have a buddy shift, somebody else teaching me and how to do things well.*

Similarly, Breena, an aged care worker, notes that firstly a supervisor taught her and then she continued to learn because she worked with others who are more experienced and “just learnt other things from my partner” and “we always work in a team”. Indeed, she pointed out that aged care workers have to work together because they need to move elderly residents with the assistance of others. Consequently, because of working with and having access to more informed partners, she is able to learn effectively through her work.

A key limitation of learning through work is when such support is not available. For example, Brianna elaborated how difficult it was to learn to use a
computer system without manuals and interpersonal support. Cary, a transport worker, expressed a similar view, stating he had no support at all and had to learn to drive a new vehicle by himself: “I just had to get in and - do it yourself”. As in this instance, others reported that it would be very difficult to learn the capacities needed for their work other than through that work. Again, as Brianna claims:

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.

Yet, where circumstances of shared work do not exist, often the case in road transport, there is evidence of intentional processes being enacted to support learning. For instance, Ivan, a transport worker, reported:

I didn’t have the same driver every day and they would take you to, they would show you where the jobs were and what to do, … and you just watch and follow and you picked it up as you went along.

As noted above, and particularly in the aged care sector, the provision of buddy shifts is used to assist individuals learn and is clearly enacted by the workplace for this purpose. There is also reference to the use of rotational procedures where workers have shifts in different kinds of work to broaden their knowledge of work requirements. Additionally, aged care workers suggested that learning with others and in small groups in the workplace is helpful because “you learn from other kinds of perspectives and experiences”. Tamara, an aged care worker, added: “if you don’t know something there is always somebody around you can discuss it with”. This guidance, however, may be more or less the case.

Repeatedly, informants referred to the effectiveness of workplaces as the primary site for developing the knowledge that is required to sustain their employability. Predominantly, everyday work activities were seen as being more preferable than organised instructional interludes. Geoff, a transport worker, stated:

... in the truck driving game you’ve got to do it at work. You really do because online is no good to you. Well my own reason for it is quite simple, you are not on the road, the classroom is not going to do the job.

He went on to elaborate how learning is an ongoing process and arises through getting on the road, meeting clients and responding to their changing needs, and also responding to changing equipment and driving environment (i.e. avoiding accidents). He also referred to learning from others, including those who are younger than himself — “younger fellas” — as sources of new learning and effective practices.
Much of what Geoff proposed was supported by fellow transport workers. For example, Georgina referred to the need to engage in work activities supported by more experienced colleagues, and Ivan suggested that more experienced drivers are an essential contribution to individuals’ learning. Once drivers have developed initial capacities, then the important thing is getting practice so they can learn largely independently. Ivy suggested that more experienced workers can mentor the less experienced and this should extend to how they work and how they organise their work. Similarly, Hayden suggested that this combination was essential and without the guidance of a more expert partner the task of learning to sustain skills and employability is more difficult. In particular, he suggested that the demands of work have increased, particularly for novices. These kind of experiences need to be augmented with practice and guidance at work, and, as he emphasised, the opportunities for doing this are not always available.

Workers indicated that direct teaching in the workplace by more experienced or expert co-workers was particularly important because it assisted them understand what is to be done and enabled an immediate social partner with whom to engage and discuss, seek clarification and further advice. This more nuanced set of suggestions about direct instruction included that when learning something new, there is often need to engage with a whole range of sources (e.g. texts, co-workers, experts, mentors), because there are different kinds of learning required and no one will be sufficient on its own. Direct personal instruction can assist with these resources.

Direct instruction at work could also include classroom and group/team learning. For instance, Brianna, an aged care worker, referred to learning a lot from others with whom she engaged in a training program:

*I like the classroom because then there are other students and other people that have knowledge too, and you can talk to them about different areas and different things.*

This consideration of learning from others in group instruction experiences was mentioned by a number of workers when responding to questions about their preferred approaches to maintaining their employability.

**Learning from external educational providers**

Learning support from educational providers was reported as being most effective when undertaken at work during work hours at no cost to workers. This was the most common experience of learning through educational providers — all the aged care workers reported this as did half the transport workers. Most commonly, this
provision was facilitated by i) external registered training organisations (RTOs) being brought into the workplace, and ii) internal trainers being brought into the workplace where the employer was an RTO. At work, training by RTOs was typically described as formal, planned, regular, specific to immediate work needs, undertaken in groups and enabling workers access to ‘new’, ‘best’ and ‘proper’ practice they could not otherwise obtain. Two respondents described it as ‘essential learning’. Robyn, an aged care worker, describes:

> Every month we’re having training and it’s good. I mean we can learn more things and how to do the proper way ... They arrange two days in the month so everyone can attend ... for all training you get a certificate.

Sometimes, training conducted by external educational providers was away from work. Such learning support was welcomed by workers when it was conducted during work hours and fully funded to include wages. Thirteen aged care workers and five transport workers reported engagement in such provision. This training ranged from short 2–4 hour workshop courses run during the work day at facilities close by, through to 2–3 day and week-long courses run in regional and city centres where all costs including fees, wages and accommodation were employer funded. Away from work, training by RTOs was typically described as well facilitated and supported through classroom and workshop delivery, easy access to trainers, and important and relevant to work because it enabled an updated and more detailed look at work requirements and necessary skills development.

Markedly different from the learning through RTOs noted above, is workers’ experience of undertaking vocational certificate courses that are recognised under the Australian Qualifications Framework. These were predominantly undertaken through technical and further education (TAFE) institutions. Respondents noted that these courses took anywhere from six months to three years to complete. Employer support of workers varied from none, to paying fees only, to paying fees and providing time off, to paying fees and wages during training. At the time of the interviews, 16 of the 29 aged care workers and four of the 22 transport workers had completed or were undertaking certificate qualifications courses while working.

Engagement in certificate courses was sometimes facilitated through a mixture of on-and-off the job training comprising one-on-one and group workshop and classroom experiences that required some private work at home with books and study guides and the completion of on-line modules. Despite the general sense throughout that certificate courses were more demanding than usual during-work training, respondents reported favourably on their experience. Alison, an aged care worker, stated:
You have to be very disciplined to do study at home on your own without the support of teachers. On the job training is good, but yeah you do need to go to a classroom with other people around you doing the same thing so you’ve got support, your peer support and your teacher support as well.

Certificate courses and their delivery were described as personally encouraging, partially relevant to current employment but more about entry level and future employment, facilitated by supportive and accessible training staff both on and off the job, and theoretically foundational for daily work practices. For the aged care workers, engaging in and continuing to engage in certificate courses was seemingly considered part of the culture of work.

Workers reported that external educational providers enable opportunities for them to meet their personal learning goals and that they have a number of positive attributes that help them to facilitate such learning. Nearly one-third of responses related to the fact that training providers enabled them to realise their personal motivations to learn — “I like to do further study, not just for this job”. Others were motivated by the employer support — “I am doing it as they’re going to pay me more for it”. A number of workers reported that certificates were good for their future employment — “A lot of what I’m studying now is relevant and it can take you further”. Others reported that they believed training organisations were important in assisting them to have the qualifications that made them job ready — “It is helping me with what I am doing” and “So I suppose you could call that further development beyond my immediate job but a lot of it is also relevant”, and “it’s helped me expand my knowledge”.

Flexibility was also a feature of the discussion. For example, one respondent liked the recognition of prior learning (RPL) opportunity that enables some aspects of earlier work experience to be credited towards the requirements of certificate courses — “it recognises the work and everything that I’ve done”. Another respondent referred to the qualities and capacities of the trainer — “I never considered looking anywhere else because it was here and the tutor I had at the time was one of the best available”. These kinds of benefits, expanded work relevance, RPL and access to highly knowledgeable trainers distinguished externally facilitated learning provision from the more common on-the-job learning experience both aged care and transport workers were familiar with. For both sectors, a culture of expected continuing training that is supported by employer funding and requirement seems to prevail.

Learning through educational providers that combined structure, expertise and shared experience both at and away from work was the dominantly-preferred method of learning to secure, support and advance currently required knowledge
and skills for work. Despite this there are some perceived issues. For example, lack of access and limited delivery options in some cases. Respondents reported that when engaged in such formal learning they have a preference for classroom activities, particularly group work; that is, a strong preference for learning with others. Interestingly, there was little preference for on-line and computer-based learning.

Other sources of learning

Workers identified three other sources in discussing learning for employability: the internet, professional development bodies, and trade magazines, manuals, and newsletters. The use of such sources was generally allied to the nature of the workers’ employment. For example, those in professional or paraprofessional jobs (e.g., nurses, trainers) tended to use the internet to keep up to date with industry information, while truck drivers were more likely to obtain industry updates through company newsletters and trucking magazines. Similarly, while conference attendance was seen as a valuable means of sharing industry information, those few who mentioned it were in higher level positions. In general, other forms of learning, including through family and friends, did not feature much in the workers’ responses, especially when compared to the roles of the workplace and of educational providers.

Supporting workers’ learning

The analysis of the interview transcripts suggests that the 51 workers from these two distinct industry sectors consistently identified and advocated an approach to continuing education and training that is premised upon the dual provisions of workplace activities and guidance by a more experienced practitioner. It has been reported that these preferences are actually elements of work practice, particularly within the aged and disabled care sector, and as such are inherent in work activities and interactions. In other circumstances, these provisions, while desirable, are not always able to be accessed, yet missed when they are not available. Even the provision of formally accredited programs is most valued when it is enacted within the work setting and as part of work activities. As noted, these kinds of provisions serve individual, workplace and regulatory requirements that are often quite intermingled. That is, individuals need the kind of certification required to work, prefer to learn in circumstances where they are supported (materially and instructionally) by the workplace, and in meeting their employer’s obligations and requirements are able to sustain their employment.
The key exceptions to this overall pattern are in individuals’ engagements in lengthy external courses which are not enacted in the workplace. But here, the personal imperative is often quite different: associated with achieving goals which are not part of or dependent upon the particular workplace situation. All of the above then can be explained in terms of different imperatives for learning, of the sort that Mills, Bowman, Crean, and Ranshaw (2012) and Figgis and Standen (2005) found, and also processes of learning that emphasise engagement in goal directed activities and having close guidance in being able to secure those goals. These data not only report aspects of what constitutes effective practice in learning to work, but also assist in outlining what constitutes some instances of the practice-based curriculum and pedagogies of these workplaces.

So, as Misko (2008) noted, it is not just personal interest and engagement that are likely to support effective ongoing learning, it is also the willingness of the employer to support and sponsor, and also presumably, the effectiveness of any available provisions. In this way, the combination of affordances and engagement are seen as being central to effective learning and meeting both the workplace and employee imperatives for work and learning. None of this can be assumed despite the overwhelming evidence of on-going learning and training being now a common and almost accepted aspect of work.

The findings suggest the need to accommodate more learning experiences that are situated in the workplace as opposed to off-site campus-based training for existing workers engaged in continuing education and training. This kind of experience can be characterised as ‘Practice-based experiences with educational interventions’. Certainly, this kind of provision seems to be working effectively in the aged care sector with instructors from educational providers engaging employees in the workplace. Yet, as noted, there may well be some aspects of the knowledge to be learnt that cannot be acquired in this way.

In sum, these data suggest that the combination of practice-based experiences and guidance by more expert others is the basis of a model of continuing education and training that is being used, albeit in distinct ways across these two sectors, and is seen to be effective and preferred over others. Even then, the various sources of guidance (i.e., by experts, co-workers, trainers) suggest that this arrangement can be adapted to a range of sources of learning support. There are solid reasons why such bases of a model are worth considering. What is reported here is well founded in contemporary accounts of work-based learning (e.g., Billett 2006; Booth et al., 2005; Figgis 2009). Also, it is the kind of approach which is operable and sustainable and one that workers would want to engage with. However, such a model differs in its enactments across the two sectors, one of which features opportunities for closely working together and direct guidance (aged care) and the other which
generally does not (transport). This conclusion suggests that variations of these bases for continuing education are required dependent upon the circumstances of work and work practice.

Overwhelmingly, guidance at work augmented with practice and the opportunities for accessing these experiences and forms of support were consistently discussed by workers. They prefer and value learning through authentic activities and with co-workers. However, it is the combination of affordances and engagement that is central to effective learning and meeting both the workplace and employee imperatives for work and learning. Workers’ engagement in continuing education and training and learning affordances of the workplaces aimed mainly at achieving immediate work goals, rather than meeting personal learning goals such as gaining a qualification for future employment. Yet, arrangements that were organised and approved by the workplace were important and legitimate means by which workers could learn their occupational practice ‘properly’.

**Considering the premises of work learning for sustained employability**

There are a number of implications to consider in addressing how continuing education and training can best be facilitated and supported in order to develop learners/workers who are active and agentic participants in learning to cope with and adapt to workplace change. Three areas particularly stand out: i) the organisation and provision of appropriate learning experiences at work, ii) developing learner support, and iii) developing learner engagement.

First, the qualities of the learning experiences are salient. The consistently reported and justified emphases workers place on the need for learning experiences to be authentic and situated in practice requires 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 desired 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 would not necessarily prioritise learning as a management responsibility over production goals. Yet, this is what is required.

There is a role here for education and training institutions to do more than deliver training on the job. Their learning design expertise can be developed
beyond training provision to include organisational management and structuring for learning. Partnering in this way, within 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. However, this requires educators and educational institutions to break with their own teaching orthodoxies. Instead, they need to identify educational and instructional practices that are suited to workplaces and can be integrated into work activities. That requires going beyond the orthodoxy of a school-like response, to use, co-opt and augment existing work related activities and interactions

Second, there is need for structured learning support. The development of such learning practices 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 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, and the like). The complexity of change and the learning required to enact and benefit from these practices requires broad and strategic support and that it be perceived by the learners as being of this kind. This support needs to be enacted by workplaces, albeit supported from those outside of them.

Third, learner engagement is central to lifelong learning through or outside of work. Consequently, workers are learners who need to engage willingly in the constant changes to which they are subject and the changes to which they aspire across their working lives. Effective learning is premised on the attitudes and practices that attend effortful engagement in learning experience (Billett, 2006; Smith, 2012). 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 learning. Both workers and workplaces may 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 change, challenge and failure as advantageous outcomes of learning and work.
Conclusion

This paper has advanced findings and propositions for how learning can be viewed as the basis of worker employability. It has advanced these contributions in the context of a need for a stronger focus on continuing education and training provision. That focus needs to address workers’ personal needs, those of workplaces where their work performance will be judged and their employability maintained, and to meet broader social needs of an economy reliant on workers sustaining their employability.

Overall, employability and, thereby, workforce development, is enabled by work that values and promotes learning. That enabling is founded on the integration of i) active learning by workers individually and collectively ii) support for that learning by the organisations and workplaces within which they work iii) the facilitation of accredited learning by education and training providers, and iv) governance by the regulatory bodies that govern that provision. Further, that integration needs to be strengthened beyond entry level training provision to ensure the staff development and retention and the proactive generation of work transformation.

The complexity and intensity of change within contemporary work demands that worker employability be a societal priority and not the sole domain of individual workers who may or may not successfully address the demands and stresses their work guarantees. As the research reported here evidences, workers can and do learn in and through work and prefer that this be the case when it is fully supported and very purposefully directed. However, the kinds of learning provision commonly reported are not always sufficiently future-focussed to enable the kinds of learning that are necessary to sustained employability across transformations in occupational and work organisation. Instead, current learning is potentially too focused on the immediate needs of reacting to change rather than generating the circumstances in which change is welcomed as the basis of employability. Continuing education and training provision that sufficiently addresses workers’ employability will need to move from a present (but weak) emphasis on maintaining workers’ skills currency to emphasise and address the broader transformations of vocational and occupational practice and enable workers’ advancement along the kinds of employment trajectories that align with these transformations. Indeed, much of this transformation is structural as Tran (2010) points out. However, and equally, if this transformation is not based in worker focused learning that addresses personal needs and aspirations, it will fail to secure the kinds of work life futures that characterise effective employability.
References


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