

**Brown, A. (1997). Facilitating learning: helping others learn within companies, in A. Brown (Ed) Promoting Vocational Education and training: European perspectives, Tampere, University of Tampere, (pp 81-89).**

**Pre-print version**

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**Facilitating learning: helping others learn within companies**

### **Introduction**

This chapter considers the implications of a major shift in vocational education and training concerning changes in the locus of responsibility for planning, management and execution of aspects of vocational education and training within companies: such responsibility may now rest with supervisors or other workers, not just full-time trainers. Indeed a VET professional could now be broadly defined as anyone with training expertise, who has some responsibility for the training and development of others. In this context, those workers with the ability to help others learn can play a key role in attempts by companies to move towards becoming 'learning organisations'.

Now the extent to which employees at any level have been trained to help others learn varies greatly in the different VET systems in Europe. For example, in England and Wales, traditionally there has not only been under-development of technical skills at, for example, craft and technician level (Steedman et al, 1991), but also insufficient attention has been given to the development of professional competence in those with responsibility for supporting learning at work (Rose and Wignanek, 1990). On the other hand, the German VET system produces large numbers of Meisters and other workplace trainers who have received some training in pedagogics (Brown et al, 1994). So it may be worthwhile to look at practice in a number of countries to investigate the extent to which training or other learning support is valued by companies. It may therefore be useful to consider how the development of occupational competence is supported in Germany and the Netherlands, and given the importance of Japanese inward investment to the United Kingdom to look briefly at practice in Japan.

The goal of such an enquiry is to investigate whether, even though there is considerable variation in the ways support for the development of occupational competence is given in practice, there is any commonality in the values underpinning that support. The final section of this chapter will address the role trainers can play in supporting the learning of others, and how the operational decentralisation of training in the implementation of training can be accompanied by a more strategic role for in-company training. Indeed such ideas are illustrative of the fact that moves towards the development of learning organisations lead to great pressures for change in the role for in-company VET professionals both from above and below.

### **Practice in Germany**

The vital role played by Meisters both in direct support of training and in the development of a training culture has often been highlighted (Rose and Wignanek, 1990; Russell, 1991). Thus even where Meisters are not directly involved in training, because of their strategic concern with the organisation of work as a whole in large companies (Sorge et al, 1983), they still keep

an overview of human resource development and training activities. In such contexts, other workers, with the Meister qualification or in the process of getting accreditation as a Meister or work-based trainer, will offer direct training support. Those looking towards their own career development recognise that the ability to support apprentices in particular, and other workers more generally, is crucial to their own prospects of progression. Similarly, more senior apprentices will be aware that supporting others is in their interests as well as being to some extent a natural activity (that is, they acknowledge that it is likely to be part of their work in future, not an addition to it).

The volume of apprenticeships, established post-apprenticeship progression routes and the esteem with which the vocational routes are held all combine to ensure that technical competence is distributed widely throughout the workforce. Those undertaking training as a Meister or work-based trainer have also to be able to develop training expertise, hence it is likely that a sizeable proportion of workers have been trained in supporting the development of occupational competence of other (young) workers. Those with coaching or supporting expertise are therefore bedded in the structures of work. This means the pressure to improve skill levels is built into the national system (Brown & Evans, 1994). There exists a 'training culture' with expectations that it takes considerable time to reach experienced skilled worker status. The German system is typified by strong commitments to the development of both technical and training expertise. This means that many organisations have large numbers of staff with the technical and training expertise to cope with an organisational focus not just upon development but also upon learning. However, the facilitation and support of team work and collaborative learning can present a significant challenge to those used to operating in a more directive way at middle management levels in some companies (Kriegesmann et al, 1995).

### **Practice in Japan**

The Japanese put such a premium on the academic route that technical or vocational education prior to work are marginal tracks. Specialisation is seen as a possible problem, leading to compartmentalisation and preventing moves to top-level jobs (White, 1987). Organisations have an expectation that they will train to the particular skills required, and wish to retain control over the company way they carry out work activities. The emphasis upon (and achievement of) almost universal relatively high standards in general education (OECD, 1992), coupled with a continuing recognition of the key importance of learning (Cummings, 1980), however, do equip the Japanese with the ability to pick up things later through more specific training.

What is of particular interest is the explicit promotion not only of group-working, but also of the skills "to show others". Japanese companies recruit school leavers or graduates with a demonstrated ability to learn, as they see this as providing a solid basis for on-the-job training (Trivellato, 1995), rather than seeking to recruit those with specific initial vocational skills. The size of the training task means it would be impracticable to rely exclusively on trainers, rather training and learning is bound up with work activities, which means that the ability to support the learning of others has to be widely distributed throughout the workforce. Such a system could only work with widespread commitments both to learning and helping the learning of others. It is in these areas where there is very strong articulation between what companies require and practices within formal schooling. From primary school onwards explicit attention is given to processes of group working.

In Japanese society behaviours supportive of group working are valued and reinforced continually during education and work careers (Trivellato, 1995). Allowing yourself to be helped by another means you are "giving that person the opportunity to display the valued skills of nurturance" (p 24, White, 1987). There is, therefore, an expectation that in Japanese companies everyone will be expected from time to time, not only to be a learner but also, to perform the role of teacher (Trivellato, 1995). Interestingly then, just as with the German Meister-apprentice relationship in a different way, needing support at work does not result in an imposition upon the 'teacher', rather it is an opportunity for the 'teacher' to demonstrate skills which are culturally highly valued. This is consistent with the approach of Nissan after setting up in England in viewing the ability to show others as a key component in the highest level of occupational competence (Wickens, 1987). Such a process orientation reflects the value placed both upon teaching and learning.

### **Practice in the Netherlands**

The Netherlands have relied heavily upon initial full-time vocational education run by 'traditional' educational umbrella organisations. Trainers also deliver off-the-job training, but on-the-job training was often unstructured, with little attention focused upon or training given to those who were offering support in the workplace. Dissatisfaction with elements of all these approaches have led to a number of experiments with structured on-the-job training (de Jong, 1992). More formalised corporate-wide support for structured on-the-job training was coupled with a clear career progression path, with the ability to offer training and mentoring support viewed as a key attribute to facilitate ascent of that path. The trainer/mentor/worker would support the development of workers learning new tasks. Of interest here then are the links between work processes and learning processes and that this provides a means whereby progression in learning directly and supporting learning in others is incorporated into a company career progression path.

The idea that the ability to help others learn has to be more widely distributed and recognised throughout the workforce is reinforced by Onstenk (1995), who argues for "the need to strengthen the supervisory and mutually supportive role of colleagues in respect of on the job learning . This task is one which is often implicitly expected and assumed of employees, without any formal recognition either in terms of remuneration, time in lieu, training opportunities or support" (p30). Such changes have implications for employees at all levels of an organisation. Thus Dankbaar (1995) argues that if workers are to work and learn in mutually supportive ways then managers will have to "learn to share and delegate power, to trust and coach their personnel, instead of simply giving orders" (p34). Dankbaar though believes the capacity of middle management to adopt such attitudes has often been overestimated. This therefore gives added credence to the idea that organisations need to rethink their whole approach to the basis on which people are promoted if they are to give greater emphasis to learning and development.

### **The importance of supporting the learning of others**

The need for the commitment of top management and comprehensive strategies for human resources development are widely recognised as prerequisites for the development of organisational cultures supportive of learning. Are there, however, other similarities of learning organisations which apply in a range of contexts? Within company settings where a recognisable learning culture exists, career progression would appear dependent upon

progression in learning - not only your own, but also upon your ability 'to facilitate the learning of others.'

This is important because support for the learning of others can be achieved in many different ways. The key is to focus on the underlying value, and not to be misdirected by the means of expressing that value. For example, the German and Japanese treatment of vocational and technical education could hardly be more different, both have major sectors of their education systems which are overstructured and in need of reformation, yet overall the systems 'work' because they are underpinned by a societal consensus placing a high value on teaching and learning. Underlying values are fundamental but could be transferred, in the sense it is possible to choose from a range of options or develop a particular way of giving expression to that value in a specific context. Thus in the absence of system-wide reform, it may still be possible for companies to take action which leads to a revaluation of attitudes towards learning. Structured on-the-job training could be used to promote within the company a culture much more conducive to learning. Work processes and learning processes are linked, and advancement within the company is explicitly linked to an individual's progression in learning, including how successful they are in supporting the learning of others.

One common feature of exemplary practice of learning organisations is the reliance upon workers, working alongside or close to others, to assist the development of other workers (Brown et al, 1994). This exemplary practice in all three countries is underpinned by the explicit development of this form of training expertise. This fits well with the considerable body of evidence that, while practical activities at work may be a rich source of learning opportunities, learning can be improved through guidance and support that encourages reflection upon that learning (Boud et al, 1985; Nieuwenhuis, 1992). These workers could be considered as 'working coaches' and they can be developed and supported in different ways. The use of 'working coaches' is an advanced form of training support, in that it requires an environment and an infrastructure which will allow it to flourish. From reflection on exemplary practice three criteria could be formulated to test whether the use of 'working coaches' is likely to be effective:

- i. there has to be a mechanism that allows a prospective coach to develop the skills of guidance, facilitation and support.
- ii. coaches themselves have to exemplify a continuing commitment to learning.
- iii. the development of their expertise as a coach needs to be reflected in career advancement and progression (Brown et al, 1994).

The use of 'working coaches' to support learning and development at work represents the development most compatible with ideas of the learning organisation and commitment to a philosophy of continuous improvement. However, the overall argument can be staged. First, the ideal scenario is for the commitment to learning to be a deeply embedded cultural value. A most highly developed manifestation of such a commitment will be where every worker is potentially at least a 'working coach'. The second stage of the argument is that there are very different ways of achieving this goal (with the Japanese and German approaches being almost at opposite ends of a continuum of possibilities). So rather than focusing upon the particular methods, it is important to look at the second-order value-commitments associated with the institutionalisation rather than just the development of 'working coaches.' The third stage

means that current attempts at moves towards 'learning organisations' should not be judged by how close they are to a fully developed system of 'working coaches' from the outset, but rather according to how far they are creating the conditions which will allow for the eventual realisation of that goal.

### **Team working**

Changes in work organisation can transform the basis upon which individual career progression takes place. Hence companies which are moving or have moved over to cell manufacture and/or team working look for team leaders, supervisors or others within the team to have or be able to develop coaching expertise (Wickens, 1987). Such coaches are not only expected to exemplify a continuing commitment to learning, but they were also expected to encourage others to continue learning. The facilitation and support of team work and collaborative learning is a major new role required of what was called middle management (Kriegesmann et al, 1995): and it may be easier to effect such changes when making new appointments when setting up a new facility (Wickens, 1987) than trying to get existing middle managers to change their behaviour (Dankbaar, 1995).

The belief in the value of support for team-working has to permeate the whole organisation in both policy and practice. That is, the three criteria mentioned in the above section can only be met at the level of production teams, if they are also met at higher levels (Brown et al, 1994). There has to be an organisational culture in which coaching expertise is seen as fundamental to management, not just applicable to production teams. Without this, some individuals may see the development of coaching expertise as a means of self-fulfilment, but it will not be institutionalised in the company as a whole. Some companies though have begun to see coaching expertise as fundamental to management development and put all their managers through training programmes which emphasise such skills. Other companies attempt to formalise support for the learning of others through the explicit use of mentoring. While some managers have taken to this with enthusiasm, the acid test is whether expertise in mentoring is reflected in career advancement and progression. If other values predominate, for example, a more narrow task orientation, then the system may start to decay. However, on the positive side, there is at least potential continuity in the messages being conveyed throughout such organisations as to the value in developing coaching and support skills (Brown et al, 1994).

### **Trainers supporting the learning of others**

The role of full-time trainers has been shifting from concerns for the delivery of training towards thinking about how to facilitate learning. They can also be seen as 'carriers' of messages about the value of taking up other education and training opportunities in general, and the value of helping and supporting skills in particular. The latter are likely to be exhortatory unless the structure and organisation of work, and the internal organisation of the company, put a premium upon team-work, co-operative behaviour and continuous improvement. In such a case, however, the role of the trainer is likely to be supportive, as commitment to development would be most effective if it comes from the team itself. If the goal is self-directed team work, then the role of the trainer is to support team development and, if necessary, to play a role as change-agent such that the teams become more self-reliant in formulating and meeting their own learning and development needs.

Infelise (1994) highlighted how trainers in large successful companies regarded action learning, project work and self-learning (with individual and group learning) as particularly valuable methodologies in supporting work-based learning. The role of the trainer was to help devise opportunities for learning in work and to ensure there were opportunities for reflection on the learning processes for individuals and groups. In this way the trainer is playing a key supporter facilitating role in helping individuals and groups to view learning and working as linked rather than separate activities. Indeed within learning organisations the increasing integration of working and learning is likely to be reflected in a process-driven strategy for continuing education and training (Bengtsson, 1993). The role of expert trainers (or training consultants) in such circumstances is to help individuals become effective at acquiring methods of self-learning and techniques for individual development (Infelise, 1994).

Two linked aspects of supporting the learning of others relate to encouraging reflection and providing feedback so that others become more reflective, independent and self-directed in their learning. The richness of the experience of, for example, learning while working can be reinforced if a learning facilitator can set up opportunities for systematic reflection on the processes of learning and not just upon what has been learned. Indeed development of the ability for critical reflection is fundamental to the process of self-reflection (Hammond and Collins, 1991). Organised reflection should also look towards what needs to be learned in the future as a means to enhance the dynamic combination of working and learning. Formative feedback from those playing a coaching role too can play an important role in the learning and development of expertise at work. Feedback can be designed to support the coherence and integration of what has been learned and/or to act as a stimulus to making explicit the mental representations or networks that underpin and lead to expertise (Simons, 1990).

## **Conclusions**

The implications of the changes outlined in this chapter for the role of VET professionals are profound and perhaps somewhat paradoxical. The traditional role of specialist in-company VET professionals primarily involved in the provision of training has been undermined by a shift in responsibility whereby a wide range of other employees (managers, supervisors and workers) may have some responsibility for the planning, management and execution of aspects of vocational education and training. However, the results of a major study of 38 major companies in France, Britain, Germany and Italy in the period 1990-1993 showed that the strategic inclusion of in-company training in the formulation of company strategy was a vital component in establishing dynamic company growth. Thus the whole role and conception of what it is to be a VET professional is being transformed in consequence of changes from above and below.

The new strategic role for in-company training involves change in three inter-related areas: the strategic position of the training department, its operational models and tools, and its methodological models (Infelise, 1994). The changing relationship between training and general strategy was expressed in the use of training as an active vehicle for the reshaping of work and occupational qualifications. The change in the operational model of training represented a move towards the provision of a consultancy service to help devise training. The service is then supplied to line managers who have an enhanced role in overseeing the implementation of training. Hence a strategic centralisation of training policy is accompanied by an operational decentralisation in the implementation of training.

The strategic repositioning of training is reflected in the way it is no longer seen as additional to work, rather training and development are linked to work in a continuous spiral of the development of new working practices. This fits the paradigm of the learning organisation, as it gives a transformative role to learning, but because learning is diffused and continuous the whole approach to training has to be reconceptualised (Infelise, 1994). Training has to accommodate notions of the intertwining of learning and working throughout a working career. In such circumstances two of the primary functions of VET professionals are to facilitate learning and to seek to ensure that the ability to support the learning of others is widely distributed throughout those working in the (learning) organisation.

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