Chapter 4
Workers in Control of the Present?

Most macro-level accounts of employment look at the social regularities of inequality produced by labour markets and employment relationships. Accounts at the institutional level tend to emphasise collective social processes and features such as 'organisational learning'. What is often missing is the perspective of employees and their experiences of work in changing social and economic contexts.

How people experience and cope with work is the central theme of this chapter. It is telling that, for young people, getting any kind of foothold in the labour market is experienced as having more control over their lives, at least in the short term. This is because entering work and drawing a wage is associated with economic independence and adult status. Yet work can be alienating and disempowering. This particular feature of Fordist production regimes has given way to post-Fordist flexible labour and economic insecurity. Economic insecurity produces net gains for the highest paid, who are also most likely to be insured in various ways against uncertainties and have also gained as consumers; the gains for those who can only find casual work or are caught in the 'revolving doors' of the lower end of the labour market are less apparent. Permanent positions have tended to be displaced by jobs that are insecure and casualised. At the lower end, many people take several casualised jobs at once as the only way of supporting their families. At the macro-level, moves towards deregulated markets have produced greater inequality; they have been associated with policies undermining workers' rights and with reductions in public spending. Yet, as with the apparent contradictions between young people's feelings of control and the social regularities in what happens to them at the bottom end of the labour market, adults in work often voice feelings of control and satisfaction with work that would seem objectively to be low grade and lacking in opportunities and security. The experiences of adults in English labour markets, discussed later in this chapter, illuminate this further and correlate with those of adults in Australia, according to a parallel work carried out by Billett (2006).

The opportunity to systematically compare 18–25-year-olds already in employment with those in higher education or unemployment has yielded further insights into the effects of labour market experience. Why is the experience of having gained a foothold in the labour market associated with greater feelings of control and agency than are manifest among peers in university or unemployment settings, irrespective of cultural context? One explanation is that this is consistent with

K. Evans, *Learning, Work and Social Responsibility*, Lifelong Learning Book Series 13,
DOI 10.1007/978-1-4020-9759-1_4, © Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2009

the evidence that control beliefs are higher in situations of change which directly affect the lives of individuals and lower in situations in which there is more distant anticipation of that change (Bandura 1995). Those with more experience of the labour market were more measured in recognising constraints and factors beyond their control. Young people already in employment were experiencing the rights and responsibilities of adulthood and made frequent reference to the new manifestations of adulthood in what was for many a relatively exciting phase of their lives, despite setbacks and problems encountered. Feelings of stress were linked with work demands and pressures. These stresses were reported most strongly by the employed groups, but those in higher education also reported stress and pressure. Comparisons with the unemployed groups showed that stress among unemployed young people was directly linked with the difficulty of their situation and more negative anticipation of changes. Change was also affecting individual lives directly; whether this is more or less intense depends to a large extent on the extent of support and the extent to which families can tide them over difficult times. But uncertain status in the early years of adult life, when many peers are in work or establishing homes and families of their own, is reflected in frustrated agency rather than fatalism. But when asked to respond to items at the personal level, expressing their own internal feelings, young people in the most vulnerable positions were more likely to believe that their own weaknesses matter. This was not confined to unemployed groups, however. Young women, including those in employment and in higher education, felt this more strongly than their male counterparts.

Interestingly, the view previously found (Evans and Heinz 1993) in younger age groups (16–19) in England that 'unemployment was something that happened to somebody else' has disappeared as they enter their third decade of life. The majority of people, once they have direct experience of work, think it at least possible that they will face and experience employment in the future, in all groups. While much public policy literature assumes an upwardly mobile career trajectory, downwardly mobile and interrupted career trajectories are experienced by many adults, and the foundations for these lie in early experiences at the intersection of the educational system and the labour market, as well as class and gender.

4.1 Adult Workers and the Significance of Biography

Labour market experiences in the early years of adult life involve considerable learning whether marked by successes, disappointments and setbacks, or a combination of these. Striving to overcome setbacks and taking chances in trying new activities are seen as positive indicators of individual agency in young people, although as the empirical encounters reported throughout this volume have shown, the dominant pattern that emerges, whether of success and 'upward drift' or of repeated disappointment and stagnation, lays foundations that are hard to shift and often have even deeper underpinning in socially ascribed characteristics of gender, race, social class and disability.

The ways in which adults move into and through working life can potentially now be statistically tracked through cohort studies or studied through individual life

histories. Although valuable, there is a missing ingredient in what we know from these sources. Adults moving into and through work engage with a variety of workplaces. Their experiences in different workplace settings often involve significant learning of an informal kind, fundamentally influenced by the adult workers' prior learning and experience as well as the features of the specific contexts of workplace activity and culture with which they engage.

Much recent research about learning in the workplace prioritises the social dimensions of learning – communal and organisational. But workers are both part of and separate from their workplace community: they have prior experience, together with lives and identities that far extend beyond it. Analysis of data from the multiple projects carried out in European labour markets[i] suggests several overlapping and inter-linked ways in which the interplay between adult biographies and workplace contexts are relevant to learning at work. The three most significant are as follows: how workers/learners bring prior knowledge, understanding and skills (many of which are tacit in nature) with them, which can contribute to their future work and learning; how dispositions towards work, learning and their personal lives influence the ways in which they construct and take advantage of opportunities for learning at work; and how values and dispositions of individual workers involve them in personalising the work environment for themselves while contributing to the co-production and reproduction of cultures where they work. The following sections show how engagement in purposeful workplace learning, understood as learning in and through the workplace, depends on that learning being well situated not only in the context and culture of the workplace, but also in relation to the personal and work biographies of the adults involved, young and mature – their prior learning, personal and work situation, dispositions and readiness to learn at the particular time and place in question.

4.2 Work Experience in Early Adult Life

Chapter 2 started to uncover the experiences of young adults connecting with the world of work in different ways, showing how the first foothold in the labour market was most important for their feelings of control of their lives and situation, irrespective of the nature and level of that foothold at least initially.

In a Europe-wide study of attempts to help young people to 'reconnect' with learning and the labour market, one of the most striking features was the way in which the apprenticeship advocates espoused the apprenticeship model as offering some of the best solutions to the difficulties of young people labelled as being 'at risk of social exclusion'. This stemmed from the perception that 'relevance' is important for motivation and engagement of young people and that learning situated in the experiences of the workplace or workshop is likely to succeed where classroom-based learning fails.

Apprenticeships are readily analysed in terms of the main tenets of situated learning theory – including the development of communities of practice and the features of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991). Examination of the

limits and possibilities of situated learning theory in illuminating learning and practices in schemes designed to develop young people's capabilities through structured engagement in work environments (Evans and Niemeyer 2004) found that new approaches were needed to better understand how learning develops in transitional and new work situations. This work paralleled that of Eraut (2004) with young professionals, showing that the tendency of situated learning theory to focus on stable working communities and on what is common in people's learning and knowledge rather than what is different between them limits the usefulness of 'communities of practice' and 'legitimate peripheral participation' concepts for understanding how learning and knowledge develop in transitional or new work situations.

People belong to different social groups beyond the workplace, in families, community groups and peer groups. In each of these communities and groups, they both develop and contribute knowledge/experience as part of their participation in the social practices of the group. The involvement may be long term (as in family groups) or relatively transitory (as in young people's peer groups), but the learning is often intense and stems from deep-rooted personal engagement. These same people move into, through and out of workplace environments. Both Evans's and Eraut's work have shown that knowledge on all levels takes different forms, and relationships between prior and new learning and tacit and codified knowledge unfold as knowledge is changed through participation in different social practices. Evans (2002b) identifies the significance of 'knowing that, knowing how, knowing who and knowing why' and explores explicit and tacit dimensions of each in relation to adults' transitions in and out of work. When these four types of knowledge are taken into consideration, recognition of the differentiation between individual members of the same work group deepens. What they learn from their participation in any given workplace is very partial and personalised, in that it depends on biographical factors such as their own personal context, their cultural understandings and history. Understandings and perspectives have been constructed through a series of life and work experiences; there is a longitudinal dimension and biographical rootedness in all aspects of skill and knowledge. While the effects of social structures are important, adults' beliefs in their abilities to change the things that affect their lives by their own actions are shaped by past habits and routines, how future possibilities are envisaged and the contingencies of present moment (see Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Evans 2002a). How individual people will perceive and respond to 'opportunities' is very variable, even within the same contexts.

This was amply illustrated in the Evans and Niemeyer's (2004) account of research into young people's engagement in schemes designed to help smooth the transition into work, carried out in six European countries. In shifting the focus towards adults' learning and exercising responsibility in the work context, cases from ESRC projects on Workplace Learning[1] carried out between 2000 and 2006 reveal how aspects of employees' individual biographies as well as their prior experiences play an important part in facilitating the 'interrelationships' between

[1] ESRC projects – Tacit Knowledge and Skill; Adult Basic Skills.

employees and their workplace environments. Since engagement is linked to the ways in which employees personalise their work situations, the analysis concludes that learning opportunities and activities are more likely to be effective when they are responsive to the micro-conditions of specific working groups or contexts and that full engagement in those activities is more likely when their significance for the employee, whether in terms of using their prior learning, their personal goals and intentions in the present moment together with their 'readiness' to take up new opportunities, is taken into consideration.

4.3 Linking the Individual and Social Dimensions of Learning and Work

A recent paper (Hodkinson et al. 2004) argued that the emphasis on an organisational or social viewpoint in workplace research comes from the recognition of the importance of understanding workplaces as organisations where learning is not the primary activity. This emphasis sometimes obscures the need to build individual worker/learner perspectives into the central social/organisational view of learning at work.

Much recent research about learning in the workplace emphasises participation. The socio-cultural perspectives of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) are well known to stress the significance of belonging to communities of practice and of learning as a part of the process of becoming a full member of a community or a participant in an 'activity system'. These views of workplace learning prioritise the social dimensions of learning – communal and organisational, and they emphasise the learning that takes place through everyday working practices. Conceptualising the place of the individual within participatory studies of workplace learning which emphasise social processes is deceptively difficult, as Hodkinson et al. demonstrate. From such a perspective, the separation between the person learning and the context in which they learn is artificial. Each learns in a context; rather, each person is a reciprocal part of the context and vice versa. The dangers of subsuming the individual totally within context are apparent, yet there is an equal and opposite danger when we research individual actors situated in specific settings, that of exaggerating the agency and scope for action of individual employees. This can be seen in some intervention studies on aspects of workplace learning (see e.g. West and Choueke 2003) that often highlight how major changes in perspective and work attitudes can be achieved with certain kinds of workplace intervention, but seldom consider these in the context of the prior learning and characteristics of the actors. Even fewer consider the structural conditions that fundamentally affect the longer term sustainability or transferability of these 'interventions' into other contexts. In examining how workers respond to new work practices, discontinuities of change may be exaggerated ('participants became empowered and prepared to generate impressive solutions' (West and Choueke 2003: 224)), while the continuities of disadvantage are overlooked, and the question 'how, and by what processes

did this "upskilling" or "empowerment" reposition or reward people equally or differentially in terms of pay, power, prospects, influence, well-being or security in the short, medium or longer term?' is rarely considered. Social institutions, the institutions which so fundamentally influence our experiences in education and the labour market, continue to interlock in ways which shape life courses, yet these may be rendered invisible. We need to understand much better the reflexive ways in which people's lives are shaped or bounded or change direction as they engage with education, labour market and workplace organisations.

In earlier analyses, individual lives have been shown as embedded in the social structures they inhabit. But as far as the workplace is concerned, people are separate from their place of work, as well as being integrated into it. They have lives that predate and extend beyond and outside their present workplace. They have prior knowledge, beliefs and identities rooted in experience that can at the most be only partially shaped and reconstructed by participation in work communities.

There have been some attempts to focus on these issues in relation to workplace learning, but each is partial. While Wenger (1998) is primarily concerned with the ways in which participation in communities of practice helps construct the identity of the learners concerned, Hodkinson and Bloomer (2002) focus on the ways in which prior biography constructs dispositions that influence an individual's learning. Billett (2004) examines the ways in which different workers react to the 'affordances' for learning that the workplace offers. In Scandinavia, there is a tradition of life history work in relation to workplace learning, which emphasises the ways in which individual life histories of workers illuminate and represent deeper structural issues which interpenetrate their lives (e.g. Salling 2001; Jorgenson and Warring 2002; Antikainen et al. 1996). While these and other studies have illuminated aspects of the problem, each offers only a partial response.

4.5 Bringing Prior Skills, Understanding and Abilities into the Workplace

Work performance has strong tacit dimensions. These implicit or hidden dimensions of knowledge and skill are key elements of 'mastery', which experienced workers draw upon in everyday activities and expand in tackling new or unexpected situations. Previous research which focuses on tacit skills and their contribution to workplace learning has tended to focus on professional learning and work process knowledge. Eraut, for example, has identified the ways in which the tacit or personal knowledge is necessary to convert codified knowledge into performance. From his perspective, new entrants to the workplace, who enter with extended periods of training and high levels of codified knowledge, need extended periods of supported practice to be able to effectively operationalise their knowledge in competent performance. Evans and Kersh (2004) focused on adults with interrupted careers whose prior experiences and tacit skills are often the most important resources they bring into tackling new situations. Adults were identified on a college course for those

aiming to return to work. Their experiences were followed through their course, in their job seeking and into the workplace. The research showed how adults are often able to use previously acquired personal competences in flexible and developmental ways as they move between roles and settings. They often highlighted the importance of such personal competences as time management, juggling different tasks or activities, handling routine work, prioritising and ability to communicate with other people. Acquired attributes such as determination and willingness to learn were also important. Other competences were more context specific. What was most important in all the cases was not the specifics of the skills and attributes themselves, but recognition by others of what they had to bring to the work situation: recognition by the learner, by the tutor or workplace supervisor and the scope to use their capabilities.

Tacit forms of personal competences are important for adults moving between roles and settings. These have been shown to be related to attitudes and values, learning competences, social/co-operative competences, content-related and practical competences, methodological competences and strategic (self-steering) competences. Systematic case comparison of learners with more continuous occupational biographies recorded higher levels of confidence in their personal competences at the outset of courses than those with substantial interruptions, except in cases whose recent work experiences had been poor (see Evans et al. 2004 for details including methodological approach).

Case analysis showed how adults' learning processes are negatively affected where recognition of and scope to use tacit skills are low. Conversely, positive use and recognition of these skills sustains learning and contributes to learning outcomes. The starting point is *development of awareness* of learners' hidden abilities or tacit skills by tutors and students themselves. Modelling of individual learning processes provided insights into adults' experiences by making the part played by tacit skills visible. Tutors and supervisors employed different methods to make learners' tacit skills more explicit: teamwork, one-to-one tutorial help and giving new tasks and responsibilities. On another level, this can be seen in the context of what Wittgenstein termed 'language games' that enable people to name, and then to claim, what they have. Often what they bring is invisible to the learner; the things that are most important to us become invisible through familiarity and routine (Wittgenstein 1953). If they are invisible to us, we are limited in the extent to which we can represent them to others. Some tutors and supervisors may be skilled in identifying strengths and capabilities brought from other contexts; many are not, particularly where those other contexts are those connected with personal lives and interests outside the workplace. The significance of tacit skills and knowledge points to the approaches which are needed in designing methods, taking into account experience, background and disposition as well as learning environments and cultures.

Adults entering new working environments (analysed as expansive-restrictive by Fuller and Unwin 2003; 2004) can under 'expansive' conditions experience their work as a continuous engagement in acquiring new skills and deploying their prior skills in new circumstances. Workers can then use their past knowledge and skills

to succeed at work and to build up new knowledge and new skills. Recognition and deployment of tacit skills in the workplace can facilitate these learning processes, together with the construction of further learning opportunities and outcomes, for the firm and for the individual worker. This 'upward spiral' does not occur smoothly or simply. In some cases, transitions into new working environments will result in disjunction, drift and stress. These are complex social processes. As shown in the latest book publication from this work, *Improving Workplace Learning* by Evans (2006), the work environment is a crucial element in these processes.

These insights into the learning and work transitions of adults have illustrated how prior skills and knowledge relevant to particular occupations may be acquired very unconventionally, by presenting the case of Anna. Anna's job placement involved work at a social service centre, assisting young people doing community work. She acquired such skills through voluntary work in which she helped mothers or fathers bring up small children, as well as by overcoming some difficult life experiences of her own involving drug and alcohol problems and involvement in petty crime as a teenager. These experiences had 'taught' her how to listen to and relate to young people, and she proved very effective in her work role (Evans et al. 2004). She was looking forward to becoming a support worker in social services. There is little attention to the relevance of such life experiences in the literature on career progression for young adults, yet these types of experiences and the skills and knowledge that stem from them are often crucially important.

Personal competences, the forms of skills and knowledge that have strong tacit dimensions, are of particular significance for workplace learning and movement between settings, but often go unrecognised. Naïve mappings of 'key skills' between environments do not work. Trainers and employers may recognise the importance of tacit dimensions of skills and knowledge, but tend to see them more narrowly than learners. Attributes of creativity, sensitivity and emotional intelligence often go unrecognised or are taken for granted.

Individuals are able both to contribute to and learn from their workplace environments, and they can do so either collectively or individually. Adults can contribute to continuous workplace development by utilising and deploying knowledge, which may have strong tacit dimensions. At the same time, various aspects of the workplace environment affect individual employees in ways that often contribute to their own progress and maturity of judgement and action. Such interactions between employees, on the one hand, and the workplace, on the other, take place in social processes in which an individual employee becomes an essential part of the workplace environment. Even if employees are not particularly active within their workplaces, they cannot avoid being influenced by various workplace interactions and activities, for example

- communicating with and/or learning from their colleagues and supervisors;
- taking part in various workplace customs and practices;
- acquiring new skills and abilities from their workplace experiences;
- deploying their own skills and abilities within their workplace environments; and
- sharing their own experiences with their colleagues.

Furthermore, employees identify personally with their workplace environments if

- they feel that they are contributing to the workplace environment and
- they also feel that they are able to learn from their workplace.

Significant aspects of employees' individual biographies as well as their prior experiences play an important part in facilitating the 'interrelationships' between employees and their workplace environment. In other words, peoples' identities and dispositions as well as their social skills, including various social attributes such as 'attitudes and norms of behaviour' (Green 1999: 128), are significant parts of their workplace settings. All employees have different life experiences, such as occupational, educational and family experiences. Their individual experiences and personal or tacit skills as well as their dispositions and attitudes make their methods and approaches to the job tasks unique within their workplace environments, yet there are broad 'social regularities' that can also be identified.

By using their personal competences or tacit skills and knowledge acquired from their previous (or current non-work) experiences, individuals influence and contribute to 'shaping' the culture of their workplace and learning environments.

4.6 How Using Tacit Skills and Knowledge in the Workplace an Change or Personalise the Environment

The findings discussed above have suggested that employees' prior experiences, dispositions as well as cultural backgrounds may influence or even shape and modify their workplace environments. Individuals tend, to a certain extent, to personalise their workplace environments, in some cases even without realising that they are doing so. A number of the 'women returners' who have recently entered new workplaces have explained how some of the skills and approaches they are using in their new jobs are similar to those they had been using in their prior experiences (e.g. educational, family or workplace). Some adults introduce at their workplaces certain traditions associated with their cultural backgrounds or previous experiences, for example the mid-day school supervisor whose own home and family experience enabled her to develop a number of valuable skills that she is using successfully in her work. While at work, she says she is trying to shape an environment for children that she describes as 'home-like', similar to that which she is creating for her own children at home. She maintains that her own biography and life experiences as a mother help her to be aware of the possible challenges of her job as well as to better understand the needs and attitudes of children depending on their age group.

Employees may often use their personal or tacit skills while they are trying to become accustomed to or adjust to their new workplaces after job or role changes. The sales assistant in the large furniture shop used his tacit interpersonal abilities, manifested in politeness, patience and affability with customers. This was to conform not only to the rules, regulations and general settings of retail environments but also to the emotional labour requirements of customer care. He gained satisfaction

in doing his job well and was positive that the skills that are useful for this type of work are personal and cannot be 'just acquired' from regular on-the-job training. As Noon and Blyton (2002) have observed, reported negative impacts of emotional labour on people at work often ignore the other side of the coin – that people whose dispositions lead them into this work often report enjoyment in dealing with people and develop identities that, over time, come to fit with the role. It is the exploitative aspects of intensified, forced emotional labour and the low wages that often accompany it that are problematic, not its inherent qualities.

Fuller and Unwin's (2003) research on apprenticeship in the steel industry also provides an illustration of how an employee's prior skills and abilities were known and encouraged by his employer, this time in relation to the worker's personal interests and longer term development. In this case, a production worker in a steel mill was engaged, outside his paid work, in voluntary work as an adult literacy tutor. When he requested financial help to pursue a formal qualification as a basic skills tutor, the personnel manager readily agreed as it was in line with company policy to support employees wishing to take courses beyond the scope of their current work. The employee was able to extend his involvement in basic skills teaching as a consequence, with the prospect of paid work and the potential for a longer term career change. The workplace as a site for *access* to learning is often overlooked. There is often potential for workplace-linked programmes to impact on people's personal lives and their communities in unexpected ways.

Factors such as people's personalities, dispositions and attitudes are significant aspects of workplace environments that affect the ways that employees perform their duties, handle difficult situations and conflicts or adjust to their new workplaces. Different configurations of employees' work and life experiences make their attitudes and dispositions distinctive and often valuable within their workplace environments. It is important to remember that this does not always work in positive directions for the employee. For example, an emphasis on interpersonal skills and empathy can reinforce gender-based assumptions and expectations. The opportunity to use experiences gained in home and family settings in their day-to-day work is most readily identified by women moving into relatively low-paid jobs that involve caring and interpersonal relationships, whether in health and social care or in 'customer care'. College-based courses can enable adult learners to draw on these kinds of personal competences in classroom and work settings, but the most effective courses use these in the learning process as a key to deepening and extending self-knowledge and unlocking new capabilities.

4.7 The Value of College-Based Elements to Workplace Learning

The ways in which employees who undertake any kind of college training connected to their work role talk about the importance of what they have gained underline the significance of their own engagement and personal agency in making the knowledge work for them in everyday work settings. For some of them, their college training

has stimulated positive changes in their dispositions, personalities and attitudes towards work and learning, enabling them to make newly acquired knowledge their own in their workplace settings. Such observations often illustrate how the 'transfer' of learning denied by many situated learning theorists can be better understood as a series of recontextualisations (Evans et al. 2008). An administrative assistant in a government department talked about the value of the part-time college course for which her employers had released her. Her account was much about knowhow as about 'knowing that', although the importance of learning new theories was also emphasised:

> I learned about quality, and customer service, and what it means to provide a good service and knowing actually how to work at improving the service, and what good service means to a customer and quality. And the quality and approach to quality, all that sort of thing. Again, managing people, I learnt about how to work as a team, a team effort. I learnt about different types of, different stages within a team. [. . .] I learnt about different theories of teamwork and information, managing information.

This set of experiences combined with the new knowledge she was able to bring to her work has facilitated positive changes in her personality, enabling her to develop her confidence and self-assurance. A nurse also explained the importance of her college-based training for her own confidence in work processes that lie at the heart of her role:

> [. . .] the other things like how to actually handle people, it's what I learned from my training because before I started [. . .] I'd be very shy, [. . .] shy is not the word to describe me, but I would be very uncomfortable to look after the person, [. . .] it's very private, you know, [. . .], but since this training I've gained more confidence in how to handle these people so I'm not uncomfortable doing it anymore [. . .].

A deputy team leader also explained that a part-time course in management had made her realise her potential as a prospective leader. Away from the day-to-day pressures of the job, she had furthered her knowledge about social interaction, teamwork and management, as well as her confidence in her abilities, and was subsequently promoted as team leader, a role in which she could put her knowledge to work in her own way. Experiences and knowledge gained outside the workplace, whether in courses or through wider experiences in the social world, have parts to play both in shaping the workplace environment and in the ways in which people develop in and through work.

4.8 Other Factors Affecting Learners at Their Workplace

A number of external factors may negatively affect employees' development and progress at work. The problems of difficult financial or family circumstances have been linked to factors that may negatively affect employees' or learners' progress. Interviews with women employees indicated the substantial barriers to undertaking additional workplace or college training because of family commitments. The problem associated with high costs of childcare has been named as one of the main reasons that prevent women from assuming a more active role in various workplace

activities, including taking on full-time positions. Another problem that has been named in this context, for both men and women, is that of health. When people have interruptions in their occupational or learning careers because of health problems, these setbacks are often hard to overcome.

Senker's research into the workplace learning of domiciliary carer support workers in the 'Careways' organisation revealed a number of examples where prior learning and experience were essential in the choice of specific work and carrying it out successfully. It is important that each worker has a set of attitudes, life experiences and skills which enable her/him to relate to the needs of the family in whose home s/he works. Barbara started working with 'Careways' after retiring (early) as a children's community sister. She trained as a children's nurse between 1965 and 1968 and took general nursing qualifications later. She had occasionally trained Careways staff, passing on some specific nursing skills. She wanted to work as a carer with children only because that is what she had done all her life and knew about. Joan, on the other hand, had only ever worked with elderly people. She was confident with them as she has learned how to cope with them over the years. She felt that caring for children would be too much of a responsibility. One worker, Denise, was willing to work with a wider range of clients. This reflected her own home background where she had cared for many years for her elderly mother, but also had a child, now adult, with Asperger's syndrome. In the cases of these individuals, their current approaches to working practice show some clear links to prior experiences.

4.9 Rethinking 'Transfer'

There are important similarities in the use of prior skills by adults with continuous professional careers and by those adults with interrupted occupational biographies. For neither group does moving into new workplaces involve simple transfer of prior skills and knowledge. Our findings resonated with those of Lobato (2003) in showing the importance of the actor's/learner's perspective, the influence of prior activity on current activity and the different ways in which actors may construe situations as being 'similar', that what experts consider to be only a 'surface feature' of a work task or problem may be structurally important for a participant, that multiple processes involved include attunement to affordances and constraints in the work environment and that 'transfer' is distributed across mental, material, social and cultural planes. Skills and knowledge have to be developed and possibly changed, as they are operationalised in the culture of new workplace. Furthermore, it is not the skills and knowledge that develop, but the whole person, as s/he adjusts, with greater or lesser success, to working in a new environment. That adjustment depends as much on the receptive or expansive nature of the new workplace as on the prior experiences that workers bring. Put differently, the processes entailed involve a series of recontextualisations (see Evans et al. 2008) that can be significantly helped or hindered by the actions and dispositions of employers and co-workers. They are also influenced by the dispositions of the workers who are moving, as the next section makes clear.

4.10 Employees' Contributions: Constructing and Personalising Workplace Learning Opportunities

The empirical encounters with adult workers have shown that the way the learners perceive and respond to the learning opportunities within their new workplaces is strongly influenced by their individual attitudes and dispositions. Adults bring to their workplaces not only their prior skills and competences but also their individual dispositions and attitudes towards learning. Their previous and parallel life experiences such as social and educational backgrounds, financial situation, family life or prior workplace practices influence and shape their outlooks and dispositions, which they bring into their new workplace environments. The workplaces themselves offer different opportunities for learning, and those opportunities differ for different workers, even in the same workplace. The differences in opportunity depend on the way in which work is organised in any particular firm and on the position and job description that a worker holds. Thus, Rainbird et al. (2005) have shown that learning opportunities for cleaners and care workers are related, amongst other things, to the relatively low status of the predominantly female, working class and often ethnic minority workers concerned. There are also significant differences, depending on the different ways in which cleaning, social care in residential homes, domiciliary social care and carer support are organised.

The concern here is to uncover how different people respond and react to these opportunities. Previous accounts (see Hodkinson et al. 2004) have shown how two adult workers brought different dispositions to their work-related learning in the shared environment of the transport company for which both worked. The first, whose long-term career with the same employer indicated acceptance and recognition of his skills within the work environment, felt very threatened by the prospect of literacy difficulties being exposed. He therefore avoided training or learning opportunities which would take him out of his work environment. The second worker also worked within the same structures, but his disposition towards learning led him to seek out opportunities to strengthen the skills he felt he lacked, in overt ways and in new environments.

Similarly, two female employees in working in big chain food superstores demonstrated different ways in which their individual attitudes and dispositions affected their workplace experiences, career development and skills acquisition. The first was a checkout controller and the second a stock controller. Both of these workers were pleased to undertake additional workplace training offered by their employers, finding this kind of training very useful for both their present and future workplace and career developments. In other respects their attitudes differed, such as in their individual dispositions influencing their perception of their duties and responsibilities as well as their involvement and independence within their workplace environments. Not only was the first enthusiastic about her workplace training, but she was also continually looking for more opportunities to undertake relevant on-the-job training in order 'to do a better job'. For example, because she often dealt with elderly customers, she found out about and put herself forward for in-service *Training in Age-related Sales* at her workplace.

Conversely, the second employee's attitude towards workplace learning opportunities was one of acceptance rather than of enthusiasm. She was happy enough to take on in-service training opportunities offered to her by her employers, because it gave her confidence in what she was doing during her working day, but she was not prepared to take her own initiative and to develop additional skills that would be useful within and beyond her workplace. She said she was content with her job as it is. In this sense, her attitudes towards her duties are quite different from those of the employee who was continually seeking to develop her skills and the scope of her work.

Through these and other cases, the research has shown that dispositions and attitudes of individual workers may play an important part in facilitating the learning environment within the workplace. Interview data have indicated that a learning workplace is *co-constructed*, involving the following:

- intermediary support provided by employers, managers and supervisors;
- elements of the expansive (stimulating) workplace environment; and
- individual worker's roles, initiative and involvement.

4.11 Employers' Perspectives on Their Employees' Abilities and Dispositions

Employers' support and encouragement can facilitate employees' positive attitudes towards work, career and learning and influence the ways in which they understand and take advantage of opportunities for learning at work. By taking into account their employees' previous/current experiences, their dispositions as well as their cultural and educational backgrounds, employers can facilitate their employees' motivation and attitudes towards work and learning.

Some employers would look for generic or 'key' skills in prospective employees' right from the job interview. One employer, working in the area of social work, stresses the importance of skills such as 'good communication skills, listening, giving feedback, building good relationships with the clients [. . .], being able to organize things, etc.'. Such skills in employees would contribute to the development of both a friendly and a well-organised workplace environment. The employer notes that she always takes into account prospective employees' dispositions and personalities when employing people who intend to work with those experiencing various kinds of mental disorders:

> [. . .] when I meet someone usually I can tell from their [. . .] personality, [. . .] [whether they are] sensitive, caring, [. . .] understanding [. . .] non-judgmental, sensitive to things like equal opportunities and issues around race, gender, people's culture. They need to be aware of those kinds of issues, if people are aware of those, they need to be aware of the impact of mental illness in people's lives. And not be judgmental. You can tell if someone is coming across if they're being judgmental and then that isn't what we're looking for. We need people who can be quite accepting and show acceptance and tolerance, who can be quite encouraging, who are themselves quite motivated because if they come across as

> quite motivated, then I know they're going to pass that on into the work they're doing. That's going to come through in their work.

Recognition of personal (often tacit) skills and competences is one of the most important factors that facilitate the motivation of employees to use and expand them within their workplace environments. If the employees believe that their skills are appreciated by their supervisors and colleagues, they feel more confident in a variety of activities. Taking into account employees' dispositions, identities and backgrounds seems to be of importance in this context, as those factors may affect their motivation and readiness to deploy and develop their personal (tacit) skills. If employers are aware of such issues and take their employees' dispositions into account, this may help them to tackle more efficiently various problems faced by their employees, such as lack of confidence or feelings of uneasiness at work. In this context, the workplace environment could contribute to 'shaping' or changing their employees' dispositions through a number of approaches that could facilitate people's confidence and self-assurance:

> Well, I'd have to find out in which area they feel low; I'd have to try and understand what basically they're not confident in and to see how they can practise and develop the skills. For me, when someone says they've not got confidence [. . .] I think [. . .] the only way you get that is by doing whatever it is you don't feel confident about and doing it over and over. . .

Employers' support and recognition of skills are significant factors that may facilitate production and re-production of expansive and stimulating learning cultures (or environments) at work. However, the extent of employers' support and involvement may vary from workplace to workplace. Employees' personalities and dispositions can enable them to contribute to a 'stimulating or *expansive* learning environment or culture' for themselves, even without active support from their employers or supervisors.

4.12 Individual Workers' Dispositions Facilitate the Workplace Environment

Employees can contribute to the development of a workplace environment which is expansive for them by taking initiative in matters such as inquiring about opportunities for their further training or career development, sharing their experiences with their colleagues, contributing to the planning and conducting of various workplace activities (see Evans et al. 2004). Employees can, under certain conditions, develop stimulating and expansive learning cultures at work for both themselves and for others. The case of the supermarket worker and her initiatives in age –related sales has provided an example. Two part-time care workers from different care felt that their workplace environments do not provide many explicit opportunities for further learning and skills development. However, they claim that they themselves can actually contribute to facilitating learning while they work. Aspects of their individual biographies as well as their dispositions influence their attitudes to their

duties and help them to facilitate learning at work. One, for example, thinks that she could learn a lot from her own experience at work with 'difficult clients':

> I can work with all sorts of people. I get difficult clients, [. . .] I have to work around that. And it tests my patience as well, you know, [. . .] it just helps me to stay calm and just think I'm going to come across a lot of stuff like this.

The second care worker is also taking a university course in *Nursing and Social Care*. In her case, she is attempting to transform her workplace into a positive learning environment by deploying and further developing her professional and personal skills acquired as a result of her university studies. She thinks that her studies to become a professional nurse enable her to contribute better to her workplace environment. Workers' personalities, dispositions and attitudes play an important part in facilitating learning cultures, even at workplaces where employees do not have many opportunities to learn from their colleagues or take part in additional workplace training.

The extent to which adults may be able or willing to contribute to the production/facilitation of learning cultures at work varies according to the workers' attitudes, dispositions or aspirations as well as aspects of their individual biographies, cultural backgrounds, previous or parallel educational or workplace experiences and family situation. In addition, the workers' contributions to the *learning workplace* can also be facilitated by such factors as employers' support and skills recognition as well as various elements of the expansive workplace environment, for example opportunities for career development or additional on-the-job training.

As with other possible learning opportunities at work, whether qualifications act as 'enablers' of further development depends on the partly pre-established dispositions of the person concerned. Where the qualification is neither a means to an end which is wanted and recognised as valuable to the learner nor experienced as important in developing wider personal competences, engagement in the learning was low, as shown by the domiciliary workers in Senker's project where some forms of learning are currently tied to the requirement to achieve compulsory qualifications. They will be required to take National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) because of government policy for all care workers.

The qualification was not well adapted to Careways workers' specialised roles. It covered many tasks that these workers will never be required to carry out, for example tasks associated with work in residential homes. At the same time, it required only basic levels in skills in areas where they already have far greater expertise. NVQs are improved continuously, and some, but by no means all, of the deficiencies identified by our research have been addressed since it was completed. Differing experiences and dispositions result in widely varied reactions to the work and learning entailed in acquiring this qualification. Several employees in this case were reluctant to work towards achieving the qualification, although it had effectively become a 'licence to practice'.

In all these and other cases, the possibilities for learning at work depended on the inter-relationship between individual worker dispositions and the affordances of the workplace, rather than on either, taken in isolation.

4.13 The Workplace as a Site for Access to Learning: the Contested Domain of 'Adult Basic Skills'

The significance of the workplace as a site for access to wider learning is often overlooked or underestimated. For many adults who would not consider attending a college or adult education centre, this is their most likely route to engagement in learning.

A highly significant, and contested, area is that of government-sponsored 'basic skills' programmes for adults. The insights into how adult employees learn and use their experience at work have been expanded by further research focusing on adult basic skills in a UK context. This research, also sponsored by the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme,[2] has the objectives of identifying when and how workplace programmes are effective in improving adults' measured basic skills, as well as their effects on other life-course variables (employment stability, earnings, promotion, enrolment in further educational programmes). It also aims to examine the impact on enterprises of sponsoring such programmes, in terms of potential improvements in productivity and changed attitudes or commitment to the organisation.[3]

4.14 Participation and Motivations to Learn

Given the significance of linkages between workplace-linked courses, workplace activities and learner biographies, a key question is whether learners whose participation in workplace 'basic skills' courses was essentially work related and who have clear career objectives are different in their experiences from those whose main concerns are with family and other aspects of non-work life. There are some preliminary indications that this may be the case, and it does seem clear that respondents who saw non-work reasons as most important were also less likely to report that the course had affected their work. The different motivations people bring to similar workplace-linked literacy/'basic skills' programmes are illustrated by two examples.

Mr. A was 44 years old and left school at 15 with four CSEs including maths and English. His parents had no formal qualifications. He is a technician for a snack food company where he has no supervisory role and has one child who is 8 years old. He has taken a Greek language course within the last five years but has had

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[2] Award number, to 2008 etc.

[3] Face-to-face and telephone interviews are being used in collecting longitudinal data, from a sample of 500 adult employees over a period of 5 years and from fellow employees and managers. Analyses combine quantitative analysis using a range of outcomes (measured progress in basic skills, employment, attitude inventory changes, etc.) with qualitative analyses including detailed analysis of transcribed interviews and in-depth studies of learners carried out in selected organisations.

no experience of workplace learning. He has worked for this company for 24 years and works full time in a rotating shift pattern. He rated his overall job highly but was neutral about promotion prospects and training opportunities. He felt valued to some extent by his colleagues but less so by the company. His job was well defined, and there was little opportunity for him to suggest changes or volunteer for other tasks at work. When he saw an advert for a workplace literacy course, he signed up for it. The learning hours where 20 in total, and the reasons he gave for getting involved in the course were to increase his skills at home particularly to help is 8-year-old child and also to develop general skills for himself. The former was by far his most important reason. He did not think the course would help him earn more money or help him get promoted or a better job. He did not think there would be any benefits to the company from his training. One year on, Mr. A's job is unchanged, and he feels more or less the same about the different aspects of his job though he is slightly less happy with his level of pay and a little more happy with the training received. He now feels valued a lot by his colleagues though still only a little by his employer. He still feels there is no room to make changes at work or volunteer for alternative tasks. However, he has no intentions of leaving the company nor of changing his job within the company. Mr. A received no certificate for his course and felt that the course had had no impact on the way he did his job. In fact, he felt the course had had no impact on his confidence at work in his use of computer. He did feel that it had affected his life outside work, and this was in line with what he had hoped for, that is helping his son with homework. He also felt that it had increased his confidence outside of work a little. Mr. A felt that the course had met his expectations 'to some extent'. He has now moved onto a more advanced literacy course via LearnDirect. Again, the only real reason he gave for doing the course was that it increased his skills at home.

This example contrasts with that of Ms. E, who is 49 years old, white with English as a first language. She left school at 15 with no qualifications. Since then, however, she has obtained an NVQ Level 2 in care through workplace training. She has also done a computing course at work. Her mother was a qualified nurse and her father a qualified electrician. She is not looking after any children under 16 and has no other caring responsibilities. Ms. E worked full time as a health-care assistant at an NHS hospital, where she had no supervisory role. She had worked for the trust for 8 years at first interview, and her job involved rotating shifts. She gave a very high rating for her job overall, but was least happy with her pay and the amount of work. She worked with a relative small group of people, and she felt part of a team. She felt valued a lot by her colleagues but only a little by her employer. She felt that it is easy to volunteer for extra tasks at work and to make suggestions for changes, and she had volunteered to do something extra in the last few weeks. Ms. E attended a basic skills (literacy and numeracy) course at work for which she signed up voluntarily. She was quite happy to be able to do the course, and her reason for doing it was to improve her skills in general. She expected that the course would enable her to do her current job better and to learn new skills. She considered that the benefits to her employer would also be a 'more knowledgeable employee'. She expected to gain certificates in adult literacy and numeracy at the end of the course and stated that she would like to do another course at work when the current one was

finished. However, she thought that it was unlikely that she would do another course outside of work in the future. One year on, Ms. E is still working as a health-care assistant for the trust, but she has been promoted. She gives a slightly lower rating for her job overall, but rates her pay a bit higher. On the other hand, she is now unhappier with promotion prospects. She still feels valued a lot by her colleagues but not at all by her employer and states that it is hard to volunteer to do extra tasks at work. However, she has no intentions of leaving her current employer and intends to stay in the same job in the foreseeable future. Ms. E saw the main benefits she gained from the course were to learn new skills and to meet new people. She rates the course overall very highly. She thought that the course had totally met her expectations and that it was pitched at the right level. She obtained an L1 numeracy and an L2 literacy certificate and then went on to an NVQ Level 3 in care. The latter is compulsory (as in the cases of care workers reported in an earlier example), but she is very happy to be doing it, as she expects that it will improve further the skills she needs for her current job. She is also currently doing a 'Back to learning' course with the open university. She reported feeling different about education in general and intended to go on to further learning with the Open College Network.

Cases of this kind lead us to propose that readiness and motivation to learn can have many origins. In the context of literacy learning, longitudinal tracking and in-depth interviews have provided an important channel for exploring individuals' experience with, and strategies for coping with, literacy in the workplace and in their personal lives. These individuals' own perceptions of whether they are coping with their existing levels of skills within or outside work challenge straightforward assumptions, underpinning the UK government's 'Skills for Life' agenda, about the existence of large-scale skills deficiencies and their direct impact on productivity with a more nuanced approach that emphasises individual strategies for coping with literacy practices and their own literacy needs whilst highlighting those cases where skills gaps exist and where individuals have indeed been positively affected by workplace courses. In both examples, the creation of better opportunities for the use of increased skill and confidence by the introduction of some changes at work could have rewards for the employer as well as the employee. In the first case, the limited 'affordances' in the workplace combined with a perception that there is little room for action to change that on the part of the employee appear to ensure that, in the first case, the benefits of the employees' learning gains are mainly confined to his personal life and his ability to help his children, although he does feel more valued by his colleagues at work. In the second case, skills development at work has been paralleled by promotion, while the employee now appears to derive more satisfaction from learning than she does from her job. She expresses future goals and aspirations in the area of further learning, but few for moving beyond her present job.

4.15 Employees and Environments: Reciprocal Relationships

The ways in which employees' prior skills and knowledge, dispositions and personal backgrounds may affect their attitudes towards work and learning contribute to their success in their workplace and facilitate their participation in various workplace

activities and tasks. Employees' personal and educational backgrounds as well as skills they have learned from a variety of experiences influence the ways in which they carry out their duties and responsibilities, deal with various workplace situations, make decisions or solve problems. All employees bring their prior skills and understanding to their workplaces, and this affects the ways they perceive and perform their duties and responsibilities.

Employers' support and recognition of their staff's skills and competences are important factors that may facilitate their employees' confidence and self-assurance as well as their attitudes towards further training, skills deployment and acquisition. If the employees believe that their skills and competences as well as their individual backgrounds are recognised, they feel motivated both to contribute to and to learn from their workplace environment. This can encourage continuous positive interactions between employees and their workplace environments where employees' dispositions and personal backgrounds contribute to the shaping and reshaping of their workplace environments. At the same time, while taking on their duties and responsibilities as well as participating in workplace training, employees may undergo some changes in their dispositions, personalities and attitudes. Although employers' support could be an important factor in this context, the research has shown that employees' personal initiative can enable them to create a micro-culture of learning at work, even without their employers' active support and involvement.

Our findings suggest that a stimulating and expansive learning environment or a learning culture at work allows the employees to perceive themselves as part of their workplace, encouraging them to take advantage of further opportunities for learning at work. At the same time, all employees have lives outside their workplace environments, and this broadens their outlook and gives them many (or at least some) opportunities to acquire and develop a number of additional skills in an 'out-work-environment'. Various configurations of their everyday lives and experiences (e.g. family, education or travel) facilitate the development of their personal skills and competences that potentially may be used for the benefit of their workplaces.

In *Improving Workplace Learning*, Evans (2006) have pointed to the understandable tendency of policy makers and of workplace managers to see workplace learning as the controlled acquisition of predetermined skills, knowledge and working practices. Managers or government policy makers decide what learning should be done, how the success of such learning can be measured and how it will be developed. The risk with such approaches is the assumption of predictability about the impact of pedagogical interventions, across all relevant workers, in any targeted context. A different approach is needed – one in which employees'/workers' 'positions and dispositions' should be taken seriously. Engagement in learning activities is more likely when their significance for the learner, whether in terms of using their prior learning or in terms of 'readiness' to take up new opportunities, is taken into consideration, for example by providing some of the learning opportunities which they value, rather than those which managers assume they either need or should want. This means that much planning and activity should be responsive to the micro-conditions of specific working groups or contexts, as well as more macro-influences.

To be successful, it will need to pay attention to power differentials and workplace inequalities, as well as individual wants or needs. In short, the approach should be to encourage and facilitate learning through work, not directly impose it.

4.16 Towards a Social Ecology of Learning

Adult employees' experience of learning is rooted as much in biographical experience as in the contexts of workplace activity and culture. Many of basic-level employees' experiences of workplace learning can be described as 'compensatory' in nature in so far as they are frequently seeking to 'make up' for negative educational experiences in the past. Case studies provide differing examples of how workplace courses can respond to employees' shifting attitudes to learning:

- Workplace programmes are successful in enrolling adults with very little or no previous experience of formal post-school learning.
- The most important general outcome of course participation, a year on, is an increase in learners' confidence: most noticeably in work, but also outside work.
- The outcomes which learners expect from courses are, more often than not, different from the outcomes they actually report afterwards.

Exploring employees' perceptions of whether they are coping or struggling with their 'basic skills' in the workplace benefits from two different perspectives on the literacy levels of employees: the assessment scores which offer an independent measure of literacy as a set of skills and the learners' own perceptions of whether they are coping or struggling with their existing skills. Indeed, some employees indicate they have struggled to carry out aspects of their job as a result of poor literacy skills. Yet there are also many identified examples of employees who have coped sufficiently in the workplace with their existing skills, in which case the literacy component of the course is often viewed as a chance to 'brush up' on their skills (Evans et al. 2008).

Workplace courses can play an important part in engaging individuals who would otherwise be intimidated by studying in a college. Various advantages and disadvantages of undertaking a course in the workplace as opposed to a college become apparent as the overriding majority of learners have emphasised such factors as accessibility, familiarity and convenience as being key advantages of workplace learning. Other factors of major significance include the differing environments for learning in different organisations (including diverse strategies for promotion).

4.17 Formal and Informal Workplace Learning

Reflexive and interdependent forms of self-directed learning, going beyond simplistic versions that emphasise independent mastery of work tasks, may play an

important role as workers engage in and shape everyday workplace practices. Anglo-Canadian comparisons have focused on the ways in which small, medium and larger companies offer a variety of formal workplace education programmes. A common feature across all of the Canadian companies is the use of the term essential skills programming. Workers, instructors and employers all use this same term to describe a full range of content and curriculum. One of the key reasons for the inception of these formal programmes was that the company was in a period of growth or downsizing or technological change. These circumstances triggered the employer to offer the training programme or in some cases a worker group to request the training from the company.

In the larger and medium-sized companies, a much wider range of formal training programmes were provided to employees, which ranged from upgrading of high-school (school-leaving) credentials to public relations, teamwork and leadership courses. Some of these programmes were offered in a learning centre at the worksite. Not all were taught courses following a particular curriculum. Some were based on participation in work-related tasks leading to recognition of mastery in that task. For example, participants such as sewers, framers, fork lift operators and fish plant processors were enrolled in the GED upgrading classes at the worksite in preparation for the grade 12 equivalency examination (see Taylor et al. 2007). One particular company developed a provincially recognised Mature Student Diploma, with at least half of the actual material used coming from the organisation in question. In the smaller-type companies, training opportunities with instructors tended to be shorter types of learning experiences such as report writing, document reading, conflict resolution workshops and numeracy instruction.

In the UK cases, 'basic skills' provision often had to relate to large, multi-site organisation. Although the classes have been carried out at a wide range of sites, they are mainly held in various centres or 'Learning Zones'. Equipped with computers and training rooms, they aim to provide an inviting and non-threatening space for learning, which includes literacy, numeracy, GCSE English, IT alongside other courses. In one case, a training facility initially consisting of a small room with five computers expanded to a learning centre became a 'LearnDirect' (mediated computer-based training) Centre in 2002 and then moved to a large purpose-built building in 2004. The centre is also open to the local community. In addition to computer and skills for life courses and job-specific training, the centre also offers adult education courses which have been very important in attracting individuals from the company and community at large. In another food-processing company, literacy and language courses were union negotiated and offered as part of a company to upskill their existing workforce in order to fill promoted positions internally such as team leader.

One of the key findings was that employee participation in a formal programme acted as the catalyst for the various informal training activities that occurred back on the shop floor. Participating in an organised class or in a tutorial session heightened employee awareness of the importance to learn. This interplay between formal and informal training was synergetic, with instructors drawing attention to ways in which employees were re-awakened to their own learning capabilities, a process

which provided a different viewpoint about their workplace and their jobs. Greater assuredness in literacy skills can bring employees to the point of approaching job tasks in different ways.

Workers began to realise that they were on a pathway of learning. As Taylor et al.'s findings have shown, for some employees, the driving force for participation in the formal programme was the credential or chances of career advancement, but this external motivation shifted once they become engaged in the more informal learning. What fuelled this desire to learn without the structures of the formal programme was a viewpoint that the day-to-day work requirements could be done differently or better through self-initiated or team-initiated learning.

There was also evidence of an interplay between formal learning and informal learning, with both external and internal motivations combining in highly context-specific ways. An example is a UK employee in a food-processing plant, where she saw a very direct and tangible link between the formal course and the skills used day to day at work. The process of a 'flattening out' of management structures meant that she was increasingly required to take on more responsibility that also entailed increased paperwork. Her case also underlined some of the advantages and disadvantages of workplace-based formal courses: such training offers accessibility but can also be potentially negatively affected by pressure from managers/supervisors on employees to miss learning sessions in order to fulfil their duties in the workplace. This appears to have occurred to several employees in this particular organisation. Greater day-to-day job satisfaction was apparent in many of the UK employees who had participated in formal workplace courses and had developed a greater awareness of the learning potential in their jobs as well as their own abilities to learn. Longer term follow-up is indicating, though, that without advancement or some kind of external recognition stemming from the employee's engagement with a combination of formal and informal workplace learning, this satisfaction can be eroded over time.

4.18 Informal Learning

Five types of workplace informal learning emerged from these case studies. These are more fully discussed in Taylor et al. (2008). For the purposes of this chapter, these types are outlined for their significance in shedding light on the co-operative and mutually responsible activities that are engaged in within the workplaces of everyday life. The first type 'Observing from Knowledgeables' included learning a new task or the same job task in a different way from a more proficient co-worker or supervisor. This often meant that the worker self-identified a mistake or error in a job task and searched for an expert to observe doing the same task.

In one particular worksite, an employee mentioned that 'seeking advice from experienced co-workers on inspection quality standards, conformance with blueprints and drawing up of specs' was his preferred method of informal learning. On the assembly line, another worker described how he asked more experienced co-worker for his technical knowhow and advice for operating the machinery.

> 'Practicing without Supervision' was a second type. For the most part, workers sought after new experiences where they could practice a skill, like problem solving, or participate in the company in a new way such as joining a union or health safety committee.

A third type is 'Searching Independently for Information'. Workers often used their reading and computer-based skills to search for new kinds of information to help in meeting challenges presented in the routines of the work day. 'Focused Workplace Discussions' with peers and supervisors was another main type of informal learning. Employees used questioning and summarising skills to engage in workplace updates. This is closely related to 'Mentoring and Coaching', another type of informal learning. Most workers who taught a co-worker how to perform a job-related task reported that this was an important way of informal learning. They realised that they first had to talk through the steps of the job task and understand the sequencing before coaching another worker. Many employees said that they were aware of an increased ability to marshall and organise information mentally when demonstrating a task to another worker. Teaching someone else helped to develop 'a different perspective on how to do something and how to do it better'.

As an informal learning process, three patterns emerged: trigger events, attitudes towards lifelong learning and inner recognition which had parallels in the UK cases and are features that transcend national and cultural differences. The trigger events that prompted the informal learning were mainly related to a company ethos of quality performance and safety concerns within the work environment. Employees who belonged to companies that had a well-defined and visible learning culture wanted to perform better for the organisation or the customer. Most often, workers who had completed a formal workplace education programme returned to the factory floor with a heightened awareness that some work responsibilities could be done differently. Taylor et al.'s study drew examples from fish plant processors who became aware of another method for packaging a product or the leather cutters who realised that there was a more efficient way of communicating measurements with its satellite company in Mexico. These events triggered independent learning by and within the work group. Coupled with this was a certain attitude held by the workers about lifelong learning. Some employees had a curiosity about wanting to learn new things at the workplace. These workers believed they possessed the creativity and imagination to learn. Other workers 'exhibited an uncertain and tentative attitude toward learning. They felt more dependent on others for help and guidance and less prone to pose questions'. A third part of the process may be related to an inner recognition that the informal learning activity has personal and work benefits. This is supported by evidence on the enhanced self-confidence that workplace learning can bring. It is interesting to note that most employees were not motivated to learn informally for monetary rewards or the possibility of upward mobility. They were 'spurred on by the need for a challenge or variety in the everyday work routine'.

Particular to the UK database, employees' personal and educational backgrounds as well as skills they had learned from a variety of experiences in and out of paid employment influenced the ways in which they carried out their duties and responsibilities and dealt with various workplace situations. Yet this was not a deterministic

process. Formal workplace programmes had the potential to compensate for previously negative educational experiences and to raise awareness of the opportunities (or 'affordances') for further learning through everyday work practices, as discussed previously. Formal workplace programmes have the potential to compensate for previously negative educational experiences and to respond to individuals' shifting attitudes to learning, with spin-offs for engagement in informal learning. There is a need to consider how the wider organisational environment itself needs development if it is to support rather than undermine investment in learning. Workplace learning programmes need to be supported by working environments that are 'expansive' if they are to be successfully sustained. Promotion prospects and strategies seem to be important in sustaining employee motivation to take up formal courses in the longer term (although there are some notable exceptions to this among the UK cases); this is less so for engagement in informal learning, where the focus is on current job satisfaction. The extent to which these gains were sustained over time and were translated into gains for the employer was much more mixed.

4.19 Theory and Practice

Boud and Middleton (2003) indicate that workplace informal learning was traditionally regarded as being 'part of the job'. However, viewing workplace informal learning as part of the job masks the origins of an entire set of workplace skills and knowledge as well as the importance of the workplace environment. Due to rapid workplace changes, researchers are looking more and more into conceptualisations of workplace knowledge base that resulted from alternate, more continuous forms of learning. For example, Ellinger (2004) examines the concept of self-directed learning and its implication for human resource development. She acknowledges the benefits of self-directed learning in the workplace as relevant to both organisations and individual workers. Yet the contextually embedded nature of workplace informal learning is not captured by simplistic understandings of self-directed learning such as independent mastery of work procedures, but encompasses the inter-relationships between employees (as learners as well as workers), context and opportunities.

This workplace learning is a complex process that involves the interplay of employee agency, workplace relationships and interdependencies and the affordances of the wider environment. These variables in some cases promote rich informal learning, for example where 'doors are opened' to opportunities to expand and share knowledge and skills in supportive workgroups. In other cases, workplace discussions and mentoring/coaching can have unintended negative influences on learning, for example where the interdependencies of the workplace are undermined by feelings of lack of trust. Socio-cultural understandings of ways in which knowledge and learning are constructed from social interactions in the workplace (Taylor et al. 2007a,b; Billett 2006) problematise simplistic versions of self-directed learning and point to reconceptualisations that can embrace the interdependencies inherent in workplace practices.

Workers in this study clearly stated the importance of their newly acquired confidence in seeking out informal learning after participating in a formal programme. This confidence may be linked to what Bandura (1998) calls agency. A worker's agency changes as he or she successfully meets challenges in everyday work routines that require learning. At the same time, as Billett (2006) and Evans (2006) have shown, the exercise of agency personalises work by changing and shaping work practices. However, this confidence to take on new challenges is dependent on the extent to which workers felt supported in that endeavour. This support is provided not only by a superior but also through supportive co-worker relationships that are perceived to be important. As Eraut (2004) points out, 'if there is neither a challenge nor sufficient support to encourage a person to seek out or respond to a challenge, then confidence declines and with it the motivation to learn' (p. 269). As opposed to identifying productivity gains relating to both formal and informal training, it may be more advantageous to better understand employee job satisfaction and engagement with the workplace.

A wider framework for understanding the organisational context recognises that the involvement of employee representatives contributes to the expression of employees' interests and can reassure them that gains in productivity will not have a negative impact on jobs and conditions of employment, where this is genuinely the case (Rainbird et al. 2003). While learning needs to be seen as an integral part of practice rather than as a bolt-on, attention needs to be paid to the environment as a whole. Work environment as well as formal learning affects how far formal learning can be a positive trigger for further learning. A short-term timeframe and a narrow view of learning, dominated by measurable changes in performance, will not enhance the learning environment and can stifle innovation. The concept of a continuum of expansive and restrictive learning environments can be used as a tool to analyse and improve opportunities for learning, using a five-stage process as described by Evans (2006).

In the UK, the evidence to date suggests considerable diversity reflective of the complexities of the workplace context, variations in the quality of working environments and the differential positions of employees within workplace hierarchies. More fundamentally, from a theoretical standpoint, more reflexive and interdependent understandings of self-directed learning, going beyond simplistic versions that emphasise independent mastery of work tasks, are needed to make sense of the ways in which employees take engage in and shape everyday workplace learning.

Literacy, in many government initiatives, is perceived as clearly defined set of technical skills, the absence of which can impact negatively on an individual's economic and social opportunities. Research findings take issue with assumptions underpinning governmental discourses (found in most advanced economies) about the existence of large-scale deficiencies in literacy and numeracy that inevitably impact negatively on performance at work and suggest a more nuanced approach that illustrates the diverse range of techniques that are employed in literacy practices whilst highlighting those cases where skills deficiencies exist.

It may be more productive to think beyond the polarised conceptualisations of literacy and numeracy learning as either technical skills development or the expansion

of social practices, towards a more ecological understanding of the phenomena observed. A 'social ecology' of learning in the field of adult basic skills leads us to consider the relationships between the affordances of the workplace (or those features of the workplace environment that invite us to engage and learn), the types of knowledge afforded by workplace practices (including knowing how and 'knowing that you can') and the agency or the intention to act of the individual employee, reflected in their diverse motivations.

These are triangular relationships and mutually interdependent sets of interactions. There are affordances for learning in all workplace environments. Some are more accessible and visible than others. The intention of employees to act in particular ways in pursuit of their goals and interests, whether in their jobs or personal lives, makes the affordances for learning more visible to them. The knowhow associated with literacy practices such as report writing or finding better ways of expressing oneself and the confidence of 'knowing that you can' often develop as the person engages with the opportunity. The process of making the affordances for learning more visible itself can generate some employees' will to act and use those affordances, and new knowledge results. In the shifting attitudes to learning, the changing levels of knowhow and the confidence that comes from 'knowing that you can' both stimulate action and the seeking out of affordances within and beyond the workplace in the form of further opportunities.

These reflexive relationships, as the cases considered in this chapter illustrate, point the way forward in developing a better understanding of literacy learning as part of a wider social ecology of adult learning in workplace environments.

4.20 What About Flexibility and Mobility of Labour?

This chapter began with the reminder that, despite the sense of control that workers may derive from holding positions in the labour force, work under Fordist production regimes was often alienating and disempowering. As Fordist production regimes has given way to post-Fordist flexible labour and economic insecurity, alienation and disempowerment take on different forms. Questions of individual responsibility often revolve around the flexibility, initiative and agency of workers linked to 'flexibility' portrayed as a positive virtue or set of attributes. Workers who have 'flexibility' in the labour market are seen to be mobile or potentially mobile in different ways. A European-wide typology of workers that are involved in job change via education and training showed that there is considerable variation in mobility experiences, positive and negative, according to how people are positioned in the labour market and in the social structure.

The types identified were broadly as follows:

Advancement-oriented, work-centred individuals: Predominantly males, 'labour force entrepreneur'; frequent job moves geared to advancement; high awareness of key competences and knowhow

Precarious occupational biography in low-graded jobs: Awareness of social competences for adaptation to new work situations; little confidence in ability to

draw on other experiences or skills in new work situations, or recognition of their relevance, both males and females

Return to the labour market after occupational break for personal/family reasons: Predominantly stability-oriented females; awareness of competences gained outside work, but also knowledge that these are seen as equipping them for helping/caring occupations or low-graded jobs (women's work!); for males, awareness of wider life competences, but these are seen as irrelevant for work re-entry – in a different dimension

In or aiming for self-employment: Both males and females: high awareness of wide range of competences gained and exercised through experience, used to pursue business opportunities, in ways that do not rely on accreditation by others.

High-skilled professional career job changes: Usually entails moves to different roles, for example advisory or consulting, or resuming a professional career after a career break, with a focus on updating and regaining confidence and networks. Wider competencies gained outside work are valued retrospectively (understanding others' experiences) but irrelevant to work re-entry processes.

Most of this chapter has focused, purposefully, on lower grade workers, many of whom manifest higher levels of skill in their day-to-day work than are attributed to them in their job gradings. Added to these are the invisible workers of home and community, the millions of adults who carry out unpaid work of caring or community work which involves skill and knowledge that often goes unrecognised (see also Livingstone 1999). These are the workers for whom flexibility and mobility is often enforced, as they attempt to move between home and work environments or experience the harshest effects of downsizing. While labour market entrepreneurs style themselves as knowledge workers and add to their portfolio through mobility, their relatively insecure labour market position is often offset by their ability to command high pay and package and sell their experience in different ways. Such benefits are unusual for lower grade workers or those whose skills have been gained in settings that are disregarded by virtue of being outside the economic sphere.

Yet there are dangers in generalising here. Even though lower grade workers' jobs may have superficial resemblances, there are other important differences that arise from the social world they encounter in their day-to-day work lives. As Billett shows, these vary within occupations as well as between them, contrasting for example the experiences of the road-side mechanic with those of the co-workers in garage automotive workshops. The experiences of workers vary not only according to the distinctive features of roles but also according to the ways in which they are construed. These 'ways of construing' are unique to individuals as they are rooted in their personal histories. Prior experiences shape construal of the present activities (as shown in the definition of agency used here). This applies particularly to how and whether people view tasks as being above or beneath them and how they view opportunities for job or role change.

So far I have shown that the relationships between individual workers/learners and workplace and organisational practices and cultures are complex and significant. Individuals bring prior abilities and experiences to the workplace; individual dispositions influence the use of workplace learning affordances, and individuals

personalise their workplace environments and thus contribute to workplace cultures and practices which influence learning.

Workplace environments are as important as training methods and supervisory practices in developing adults' skills and knowledge, including their tacit skills. Labour market training agencies, employers and trades unions need to be better informed about the importance of learning of employee dispositions and workplace environments and the opportunities that remain untapped when they are neglected. Most of all, purposeful learning depends on the individual's readiness to engage and learn. This is often as strongly influenced by biographical and out-of-work factors as it is by workplace environments. Although workplace learning may have immediate or obvious relevance to job skills, the long-term impact of learning on adults' capabilities – and thus on productivity as well as on life satisfaction – will depend on out-of-work activities as much as on workplace participation.

There is a relational interaction between individual and social agency that mirrors the relationship between individual responsibility and social responsibility in work. Both agency and responsibility are personal engagements with particular forms of social practice, focused in different ways and engaged in with different intentionality. Views of shared social practices that assume that they are experienced in the same way and shape identities uniformly are not borne out by the empirical encounters reported here. As Billett (2006) has said, an individual's personal history provides a platform for their coming to know and making sense of what is encountered in workplaces. This sense-making process fundamentally shapes and reflects the person's intentionality and agency in ways in which they engage with work roles and the wider social environment.

Analyses of how individuals engage with the affordances of work – what work offers them and can do for them – shows that the distribution of affordances is, however, far from benign and is associated with the occupational hierarchies that operate with different degrees of visibility in organisations.

Work and learning are constructed in dynamics that operate in and through three overlapping scales of activity. As Lave (2009) has observed, whenever you encounter practice you also identify learning. The individual workers' activities and interactions that do much to change and to remake the practices (Billett 2006) are also fundamentally influenced by the conflicts in the wage relationship. Writers in the field of industrial relations distinguish between the unitary views of the employment relationship that see employees and employers as having an identity of interests (Fox 1966) and those that see conflict as inherent since workers and managers have different interests and power bases. According to Edwards, managers and workers are 'locked into a relationship that is contradictory . . . because managements have to pursue the objectives of control and releasing creativity, which call for different approaches'. So workplace learning (Evans 2006) is constituted in sites in which antagonistic relationships are expressed, but may also involve a degree of co-operation and the establishment of consensus.

The worth of work and their occupations to individuals has often been overlooked in sociological analyses that have focused on the conflict inherent in the employer–employee relationship. Noon and Blyton (2002) have shown that the majority of

people in most categories of jobs would continue to work even if there was no financial need. Work has a salience for individuals in affording opportunities to use their 'capacities as humans and contributors to workplaces and communities' (p. 87). In paid employment, how individuals direct their energies and capacities in their conduct of paid work is central to workplace performance. This is not the unthinking and disengaged deployment of skills, as the examples have shown.

People forge identities within and through their practices. The cases outlined in this chapter radiate different senses of themselves as particular kinds of worker as well as people with particular personal interests and commitments. These senses of self are thus many dimensional and represent the variety of ways in which people position themselves in relation to their employment and other purposeful activities that constitute work. Sense of self is realised through unpaid as well as paid work, whether in home family or community. All forms of work contribute to identities.

As Sennett (1998) has shown, the wider societal factors that drive the employer–employee relationship are oblivious to the personal goals of workers. The differential ways in which work of various kinds is valued in society reflects wider power relations. The processes of disempowering and deskilling in some large corporations have been facilitated by a dominant logic that emphasises the 'I' while losing sight of the 'we', leading people to blame themselves for their own dispensability They assume individual responsibility for situations beyond their control while remaining blind to the social regularities of their and others' situations. The potential for the exercise of social rights and responsibilities in and through work is a theme that can be expanded in relation to the livelihoods of communities adversely affected by social and economic changes. This includes redefining the roles of trades unions as bodies representative of workers' interests operating far beyond the confines of particular industries or workplaces.

The logic of social responsibility necessitates the humanising of social relations in the social practices and structures of work. These reflexive changes in the environments and practices of work demand new ways of thinking that go beyond preoccupations with the direct managerial surveillance and manipulation of work 'performances' towards better understandings of the ways in which people direct their energies and capacities in the social relations of workplace environments.

4.21 Summary and Conclusion

The worth of works and their occupations to individuals has often been overlooked in sociological analyses that have focused on the conflict inherent in the employer–employee relationship. Noon and Blyton (2002) have shown that the majority of people in most categories of jobs would continue to work even if there was no financial need. The significance of work for people is that they look to work to provide them with opportunities to use their capacities and to contribute to something beyond themselves as well as providing them with a livelihood. In paid employment, the ways in which people direct their energies and capacities in carrying out their day-to-day work lie at the heart of workplace performance and productivity. People

forge identities within and through their practices and experiences in and out of work. The cases outlined in this chapter radiate the different senses people have of themselves as particular kinds of worker as well as people with particular personal interests and commitments. These senses of self represent the variety of ways in which people position themselves in relation to their employment and other forms of purposeful activity that constitute work. Sense of self is realised through unpaid as well as paid work, whether in home family or community. All forms of work contribute to identities.

This is not to deny that many experiences of work and workplaces seriously disappoint and that in the longer term, repeated exposure to peer work environments can close down people's horizons and beliefs in themselves. Recognition of personal investments in work must not lose sight of the wider societal factors that drive the employer–employee relationship, which as Sennett 1998 argues are 'oblivious to the personal goals of workers'. The ways in which work of various kinds is valued in society reflect wider power relations. A dominant logic has also taken hold that emphasises employees' individual responsibility for their own performance over the inherent interdependencies of work – leading people to blame themselves for shortcomings and often, ultimately, their own dispensability. Through these processes, people come to assume individual responsibility for situations beyond their control while remaining blind to the patterns that keep repeating themselves, the social regularities of their and others' situations. Social rights and responsibilities have to be re-examined in the light of these well-documented patterns of vulnerability. This includes rethinking the roles of trades unions as bodies representative of workers' interests operating far beyond the confines of particular industries or workplaces.

Replacing the logic of individual responsibility with the logic of social responsibility points the way towards humanising social relations in the social practices and structures of work. The direct managerial surveillance and manipulations of work 'performances' that new technologies have made ever more possible are also generating resistance that promises to intensify further. The way forward, for companies that need the commitment and motivation as well as the skills and capacities of their employees, is towards better understandings the ways in which people direct their energies and capacities in the social relations of workplace environments.

Note

i. It is based on the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, including more than 100 case studies, from a series of projects led by the authors, including two UK Economic and Social Research Council projects on adult learning in work environments, and builds on analyses carried out in European projects involving partners in Belgium, Finland, Germany, Portugal and Greece (see Evans and Niemeyer (2004); Evans et al. (2004); Kersh and Evans (2005); Evans (2006)).