

Taking an Expansive Approach to Workplace Learning: Implications for Guidance

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Learning in the workplace can bring economic, social and personal benefits. Yet, building upon, improving and extending such learning places significant demands on everyone involved, from individuals and employers to government and its agencies.

This paper argues that an understanding of, and support for, teaching and learning has to lie at the heart of a new workforce development strategy. It explores how access to workplace learning can be enhanced and provision fostered and improved. The role of guidance in helping to expand opportunities for workplace learning is also considered.

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“I think most of us are looking for a calling, not a job. Most of us, like the assembly line worker, have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people.” (Nora Watson, quoted in Studs Terkel’s, Working, 1972, xxiv)

Introduction

Surprisingly, since most adults consider work to be central to their everyday lives, the extent to which they might be learning at work has tended to be ignored by policy-makers, educationalists and employers. Learning related to the workplace was defined in formal terms as ‘training’ or ‘staff development’, activities which occurred away from the workplace itself. In recent years, however, the workplace is being recognised as a significant site for learning.

For policy-makers, the concept of learning at work offers the potential of delivering economic benefits as well as tackling social exclusion. For educationalists and trade unionists, workplace learning represents the opportunity to reach adults who do not participate in or have little access to formal learning opportunities. Most importantly, the workplace can provide a supportive and motivating site for individual adult learners to enhance their skills and knowledge, as well as act as a springboard for learning outside work. The 2001 Survey on Adult Participation in Learning, conducted by NIACE, confirmed that “working status has a significant impact on participation” with the greatest gains in participation among part-time and full-time workers. Research also tells us that many young people, who have struggled to achieve at school, find the workplace a more conducive environment in which to demonstrate their potential (Unwin and Wellington, 2001).

Workplace learning can bring economic, social and personal benefits. To build upon, improve and extend workplace learning, however, requires considerable vision and effort. In this lecture, I will explore the following questions:

- How can learning be fostered, improved and increased in the workplace?

- How can access to and participation in workplace learning be enhanced for employees at all levels, including the self-employed and those in the voluntary sector?
- What role can guidance play in helping to expand opportunities for workplace learning?

I do not seek to minimise the considerable problems that some people face at work, including, for example: inequalities related to race, gender, sexual inclination and age; pressures to work excessive hours or to accept inappropriate tasks; and the dangers arising from unsafe practices. The recent book by the journalist and social commentator, Polly Toynbee (2003), provides a graphic and disturbing picture of the exploitation and drudgery faced by workers in some parts of the UK’s service industries. Such problems go way beyond the scope of this lecture but, even withstanding their deep-rooted nature, they may be lessened or improved by greater awareness on the part of employers of the talents and capabilities of their staff.

My lecture draws and builds on my recent research with Alison Fuller conducted under the ESRC’s Teaching and Learning Programme. For a more detailed discussion of the issues raised in this lecture, see Unwin and Fuller (2003).

Workplace Learning Policy

Any attempt to advocate more and better workplace learning has to be based in reality. The key objective of the vast majority of workplaces is not ‘learning’ but the successful delivery of goods and/or services. Learning plays a vital role in meeting that objective but its contribution is often minimised because learning is a difficult process to separate out from other day-to-day activities. For many years, there has been a fierce debate in the academic literature around the extent to which ‘training’ (the term usually associated with structured episodes of learning) contributed to organisational performance. More and more

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people are taking the view that trying to identify a direct correlation between training and organisational performance is a pointless exercise. What matters is that many employers intuitively know that workplace learning is influential but they don't attempt to take a direct measurement of its impact (see, *inter alia*, Kitching and Blackburn, 2002; Fuller et al, 2003).

From a policy perspective, the great challenge is to try and persuade employers that investment in workplace learning will contribute to improvements in their business performance. In 1988, an influential study argued that the UK was stuck in a 'low-skills equilibrium' (Finegold and Soskice, 1988). Too many employers were happy with producing products and services of low quality, a situation reinforced by the shareholder mentality of a City of London only concerned with short-term profit. The policy of deregulation introduced by the Thatcher government in the 1980s has been continued by subsequent Conservative and Labour governments to the extent that politicians have been very loath to interfere in the world of business and have forced the public sector to adopt more private sector practices. Although this has brought record levels of employment (in contrast to other countries in the European Union), the nature of some of that employment (low pay, low skill and long hours) is a cause for concern (see, *inter alia*, Brown et al, 2001; Keep, 1999 and 2002).

A recent report on the UK's approach to economic and industrial strategy, commissioned by the government, re-emphasised the fact that too many UK businesses are still operating in low quality product markets (Porter and Ketels, 2003). This creates a self-defeating circle in which employers produce cheap, poor quality products and services which are sold to consumers who themselves are working in sectors which pay low wages. Not surprisingly, this has an impact on the demand for skills in the workplace. In 2003, the UK is recording high levels of paid employment, yet a third of the workforce has qualifications below level 2.

At the same time, nearly 7 million jobs require no qualification at all. By relying solely on improvements to schooling, it is expected that, by 2010, 70% of the workforce will hold at least a level 2 qualification; but this has to be set against the fact that Germany and France are already well ahead of that figure. The workplace has to make a bigger and better contribution to the UK's learning gap. Furthermore, the workplace can and should be a natural site for learning, capable of motivating people of all ages to develop their skills and acquire new knowledge both in and outside work settings.

In 2001, a report from the Cabinet Office's Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) had a major impact because, unlike previous government reports over the years, it announced that the demand for what it called 'workforce development' must come from employers as well as individuals (PIU, 2001). Whilst seemingly common sense to most people, the PIU's willingness to state publicly that employers should raise their game was a considerable policy breakthrough. Building on earlier work by the National Skills Task Force, the PIU identified work and enhanced workforce development as the keys to a more prosperous and socially inclusive society. The report also broke new ground by moving away from the simplistic rhetoric of some government documents and, instead, described the complex cultural and structural problems which lie behind the reluctance of both employers and individuals to engage and invest in learning. The PIU report heralded a major push from government to galvanise the appropriate agencies and employer-bodies into promoting and enhancing workplace learning, and it gave extra support to those advocating a central role for the trade unions.

In July 2003, the Department for Education and Skills (in partnership with the Department for Trade and Industry, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury) published a White Paper outlining a national 'skills strategy' (DfES, 2003). Sadly, the White Paper backs off from the challenging agenda outlined

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by the PIU report and interprets 'demand-led' in terms of employers and individuals being able to exercise their 'consumer rights' in terms of accessing the types of education and training they desire. It does not address the pressing need for employers to raise their game. The White Paper does, however, acknowledge that any attempt to increase investment in skills and workplace learning more generally has to be viewed in terms of the relationship between learning and organisational context. This is significant as, for too long, government policy has tended to focus on the need to raise the skill levels of individuals, as if skills (and vocational knowledge) exist in a vacuum. A number of important developments central to the enhancement of workplace learning are currently under way:

- Collaboration between local Learning and Skills Councils and Regional Development Agencies to bring employers and education and training providers closer together.
- The expansion of Employer Training Pilots which provide funding to subsidise the cost of sending employees on training courses.
- An increase from £11m to £14m a year for the Union Learning Fund which, since its launch in 1998, has supported over 400 initiatives for employees in a range of learning opportunities and the statutory right (under the Employment Act, 2002) for 4,500 Union Learning Representatives to take paid time off from work to open up learning opportunities for employees.
- The identification of 20 leading employers to act as Employer Champions to promote adult basic skills training in the workplace.
- Development of a "no wrong door" policy to make sure businesses can get the advice they need for improving their performance.
- The expansion and improvement of Modern Apprenticeship.
- The development of a coherent work-based

pathway which will begin with 14 year olds in school and stretch through apprenticeship to Foundation Degrees and on to professional status.

- The establishment of Centres of Vocational Excellence for the provision of education and training in colleges and other providers.

The success of all these developments will partly depend on their ability to expand and improve learning in the workplace.

Workplace learning

I use the term 'workplace learning' to embrace all types of learning generated or stimulated by the needs of the workplace, including: formal on-the-job training; informal learning; and work-related off-the-job education and training (see, inter alia, Evans et al, 2002; Eraut et al 2000; Beckett and Hager, 2002). A key theme for my lecture is that workplace learning needs to be understood as an embedded process which depends on but can also shape and change the culture and behaviour of an organisation. Furthermore, I want to argue that where people have been encouraged and supported in their work-related learning, they are more likely to have the confidence to engage in learning outside the workplace.

As a 16-year-old bakery assistant in Manchester in the 1930s, my mother learned how to apply the most elaborate and fine filigree icing to wedding cakes by watching her boss. This was not the well-known approach of 'sitting by Nelly', as my mother was not an apprentice. Her 'secret watching', as she called it, had to be done whilst she went about her own more lowly duties such as preparing chocolate icing for the éclairs, washing up and rolling macarons in coconut. She memorised her boss's skills and practised them at home on friends and family. This expertise enabled her to supplement a meagre wage by earning valuable extra money in her spare time. Was this learning 'formal', 'informal', 'tacit', or 'non-formal'? It was certainly 'planned' and 'intentional', two characteristics not often associated with the

'informal'. Yet it was also 'tacit' in that she found it very difficult to explain to me how to estimate the consistency of the icing to ensure the right balance of delicacy and strength. It combined artistry with manual skill (beating large quantities of sugar and egg white without electric tools is a tiring process) and vocational knowledge (e.g. add glycerine to stop the icing becoming like concrete). It was situated and experiential, and progressed through much trial and error. My mother's experience is typical of so many people who are restricted to carrying out certain functions in the workplace and whose potential is never exposed or recognised (see also, Unwin 2002).

Perhaps the most well-known example of workplace learning is the apprenticeship model of formation training, which was founded on the principle that young people would learn best alongside more experienced colleagues in the workplace. Apprenticeship is a universal term, recognised across both the industrialised world and in pre-industrial societies. In workplaces which encourage and celebrate learning, new recruits, apprentices and experienced workers establish 'communities of practice' in which skills and knowledge are passed from one generation to the next (Lave and Wenger, 1991). We know, however, that many people work in organisations that do not encourage learning, either at individual or organisational level. There are also organisations which might aspire to take learning more seriously but which are hampered through structural problems such as being under-staffed or being stuck at the low quality end of the product market.

Whilst acknowledging the negligent attitude of many employers when it comes to improving the skills and knowledge of their employees, it has to be remembered that running an organisation, whether in the public or private sector, is a complicated business. The nature, size and scope of workplaces varies enormously, but most are subject to the common pressures of: competition; external regulation; reliance on the State to provide decent transportation and other infrastructure; finding and attracting the right people; and the

fragility of the local and/or sectoral economy in which they are located. There is little time, therefore, to debate the role and place of workplace learning. Size matters enormously here. Those organisations classified as 'small' under the definition of the 1985 Companies Act (that is, with less than 50 employees) make up 99% of UK private-sector businesses and account for 43.4% of employment. These organisations are less likely to: offer their employees structured training opportunities; be involved with government-funded initiatives such as Modern Apprenticeship; and have Union Learning Representatives and NVQ assessors on site.

It also has to be remembered that employees, as well as employers, can be ambivalent when it comes to workplace learning. When employees are offered training and development opportunities, they will be construed positively or negatively depending on the nature of the workplace itself. For example, such opportunities may be seen as a reward for and recognition of effort, as a signal of value or to give status. On the other hand, training may be seen as a threat, an indicator of poor performance or a signal that work is about to be intensified. Some people create a clear separation between their lives in and outside work and regard learning as something which is confined to the latter. Others may learn a great deal in the workplace but are reluctant to pass this learning on to their less experienced colleagues. This is often related to their fear of losing their job (particularly to younger people) or other barriers that their employer has created. Such ambivalence can, however, be lessened if workplace learning is seen to have meaning and benefit for the individual.

Expanding workplace learning

In this section of the lecture, I introduce a model of workplace learning which I have developed with my research colleague, Alison Fuller. In order to discover how, why and for whom workplace learning occurs, it is necessary to understand the interaction between the organisational context, the workplace learning environment and the individuals

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engaged in learning. Hence, if you want to understand why the nature and content of apprenticeships vary so much from one organisation to another or why some organisations only offer learning opportunities to their managerial staff, you have to examine the following: the history and culture of the organisation; how work is organised and controlled; the skills profile of the company and how the skills are distributed; the extent to which the range of tasks and skills have been mapped; and the availability of a structured learning programme designed to generate opportunities to gain breadth and depth.


The ideas I now present were developed in a three-year study of workplace learning in various companies in the UK's steel industry. The main aim of the study was to examine how apprentices and older workers were learning to do their jobs in a sector which is undergoing extensive change (see Fuller and Unwin, 2003, for more detail). We were particularly interested in why the young people in our study were experiencing very different forms of apprenticeship (in terms of the access they had to learning opportunities and the progression they were able to make) across our selected companies. It became clear to us that each company created its own type of 'learning environment', which reflected the culture and history of the company. In order to explore this

more fully, we developed the concept of the 'expansive-restrictive framework'. Organisations which display 'expansive characteristics' can be said to provide 'expansive learning environments'. The term 'expansive learning', derived from the work of the Finnish researcher, Yrjo Engstrom (2001), might be better understood as learning which is creative and dynamic and constantly evolving. Such learning is not confined by artificial workplace boundaries that restrict employees from crossing from one area of expertise to another, or from contributing to discussions about how problems might be solved or work better organised.

The importance of the model proposed here, however, is that it places learning firmly within a wider organisational context. In other words, workplace learning cannot be expansive or restrictive on its own: it results from the organisational structures and cultures of which it is a part.

Table One displays the organisational characteristics of the expansive-restrictive framework. The model proposes that the expansive/restrictive characteristics of the way in which work is organised are then translated into the infrastructure for workforce development and, hence, an organisation's learning culture, as *Table Two* shows.

Table One: Work Organisation and Mission



Expansive	Restrictive
Widely distributed skills	Polarised distribution of skills
Technical skills valued	Technical skills taken for granted
Knowledge and skills of whole workforce developed and valued	Knowledge and skills of key workers/groups developed and valued
Team work valued	Rigid specialist roles
Cross disciplinary groups/communication encouraged	Bounded communication and work
Manager/supervisor as enabler	Manager as controller
Chances to learn new jobs/skills	Lack of workplace mobility
Expanded job design	Restricted job design
Bottom-up approach to innovation	Top-down approach to innovation
Formative approach to evaluation	Summative approach to evaluation
Individual progression encouraged – strong internal labour market	Weak internal labour market – recruitment usually from outside to meet skill needs

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Table Two: Organisational Learning Cultures



Expansive	Restrictive
Strong workplace learning infrastructure/department and dedicated staff	Workplace learning conceived narrowly as 'events'
History of training/handling down training values	Ahistorical, lack of organisational memory
Learning valued throughout company kept as a constant	Shift in business culture can cause sudden shift in approach to workplace learning
Learning activities are proactive rather than reactive	Learning activities may appear ad hoc
Employees given time to develop and reflect on their learning away from the workplace	All learning opportunities confined to immediate workplace/work station
Traditional, knowledge-based VQs valued, whole qualifications valued	Competence-based VQs and unit-based approach preferred for ease and speed
Strong concept of apprenticeship/formation training model	Weak concept and little or no tradition of apprenticeship/formation training
Broad approach to developing whole workforce and organisation	Emphasis on management training and behavioural change
Long-term investment in people	Purpose of activities often unclear
Good training reputation in local community	Reputation for routine jobs, problems with staff turnover
Purpose of workplace learning is enhanced capability as well as for immediate business goals	Relationship between workplace learning and performance not understood
Approach to workplace learning evolves/incremental change	Approach to workplace learning reflects short-term business strategy

As we can see from this table, the cultural differences determine the character of the learning opportunities on offer in an organisation: hence some organisations provide an expansive learning environment, whereas others provide more restrictive learning environments. This model allows organisations to analyse their characteristics to see where they lie on the expansive-restrictive continuum and consider the changes they need to make to move further towards the expansive end. The model can be applied regardless of the size or nature of the organisation and by those in both

the public and private sectors and the voluntary sector.

It is important to stress that the model should be seen as a continuum and not as a rigid polarisation of 'good' (expansive) and 'bad' (restrictive) practice. There will be occasions when, for various reasons, organisations have to move more towards the restrictive end of the continuum. The following vignettes are drawn from our research and illustrate the framework in action.

An expansive approach to apprenticeship

This company manufactures bathroom showers and employs some 700 people. It has a well-established apprenticeship programme which has been used to develop successive generations of skilled and qualified engineers and technicians. Many of the company's ex-apprentices have progressed to senior management positions. Currently, the company employs five apprentices in engineering, one in steel production and processing, and one in accountancy. The apprentices participate in learning over time and in many internal 'communities of practice' by rotating through the different departments. They attend the local college on a day-release basis where they pursue knowledge-based vocational qualifications that can also qualify them for entrance to higher education. The apprentices take part in residential courses to develop team-working skills and, through the company's apprentice association, they get involved in charity activities in the local community. This means they cross boundaries in terms of the places in they develop their skills and are not restricted to one part of the actual workplace.

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A restricted approach to apprenticeship

This company is a small, family-run company of around 40 employees providing steel polishing services to other businesses. The vast majority of employees work on the shopfloor as semi-skilled machine operators. The company offered its first apprenticeships two years ago, as a response to difficulties it was having in recruiting adults with relevant experience, and currently employs two apprentices in (steel) production processes. The apprentices are primarily members of one community of practice, which centres on the operation of steel polishing machines in a shopfloor environment. They have learned from more experienced employees and have become full participants in under one year. Access to participation in communities of practice beyond the workplace is limited to attendance at a series (about 10) of off-the-job, half day sessions on 'steel industry awareness' which take place in the training provider's premises. The apprentices pursue standards-based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at work with the help of their supervisor and a training provider who makes occasional visits to monitor their progress. They do not have access to knowledge-based vocational qualifications and are now stuck in a job which offers no progression.

Using expansive job design to foster collaborative learning

This company is a steel 'stockholder' with some 80 employees, buying and selling steel. In order to compete, the company must successfully market and sell its steel products by assuring their quality, value for money and the efficiency of the company's services. To meet these business goals, the company is investing in management development and customer service training. To address the concern that sales staff had developed specialist knowledge of a limited number of products, the company decided to rearrange the way their work was organised, jobs were designed and desks were arranged. Under the new system, sales staff were required to sell all the company's product lines, hence, they needed to learn about different products and get to know new customers. To support the change and to encourage the sharing of knowledge and information, desks were reconfigured in a circular seating arrangement to facilitate knowledge exchange and problem solving. Some of the sales staff had initially felt that their specialist (expert) status would be undermined by the change. In practice, they found that they had added to their knowledge and had gained from seeing how other people worked and the greater opportunities available for collaborative problem-solving.

Using team-working to encourage new learning

This company employs some 300 people and manufactures large steel rods and bars mainly for use in the construction industry. Management and unions have negotiated a substantial package of changes in employees' pay, terms and conditions. This involves a reorganisation of shifts and shift patterns and the guarantee of pay rises for those workers signed off as competent in 60% or more of their shift's tasks. A simplified and less highly stratified division of labour was introduced to encourage flexible working and reduce what were seen as restrictive practices. An important component of the new system related to the creation of a new post of team leader to replace the traditional job of foreman. Several of the team leaders had previously been foremen and were able to contrast the roles. There were two major extensions to the original job and both of these were direct consequences of the reorganisation of work, pay and conditions. First, team leaders were responsible for helping all members of their teams to achieve the 60% 'competency threshold'. In some cases, this meant that much of their time was spent training others and recording their achievements. Second, tasks relating to the organisation of work and the attainment of targets (e.g. on production and health and safety) were delegated from shift managers to team leaders. This meant that team leaders were now responsible for motivating their teams as well as monitoring progress. The extended job design, together with support from off-the-job workshops, created opportunities for new learning and a multi-dimensional approach to the acquisition of expertise.

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An expansive approach to learning outside work

This company has a tradition of supporting employees who want to take up educational opportunities outside work in their own time on the basis that it creates good will, helps the individual and may promote employee loyalty. Individuals are invited to make requests to the personnel manager for financial help in paying course fees. Examples include four men, aged between 39 and 44 years old, who are studying as follows: to teach basic skills; for a humanities degree; for an Higher National Certificate in Business and Information Systems; and for a Computing and IT degree. Although they recognise that there is no direct relationship between their work for the company and the topics they are studying, the men believe that the courses are helping them to maintain a positive attitude at work despite there being negligible possibilities for any career progression. They had all chosen knowledge-based courses to be stretched intellectually. They also wanted to pursue well-respected qualifications which might be useful should they need to seek alternative employment.

A key characteristic of an expansive learning environment is the belief that people at all levels across the organisation both possess valuable skills and knowledge and have the capacity to learn. Behind such a belief is a key characteristic of an expansive organisation: that is, the corresponding belief that organisations need to learn in order to perform more effectively. This implies that any agency attempting to improve workplace learning opportunities must understand how a particular organisation has evolved and the nature of its cultural make-up in order to assess its ability to respond. Organisations positioned towards the restrictive end of the continuum will require considerable support to enable them to assimilate and then implement new ideas.

The expansive-restrictive model could be used, therefore, to analyse the workplace learning characteristics of individual organisations. It could also be used to assess the characteristics of occupational sectors in order to establish the likely barriers to the acceptance of new initiatives. This could be particularly useful for staff in Regional Development Agencies, Sector Skills Councils, local Learning and Skills Councils, and the Small Business Service. Within sectors which, historically, have demonstrated more restrictive characteristics, it may be possible to identify certain organisations which have broken free of these traditions and so determine strategies that might move the whole sector towards a more expansive future.

Implications for Guidance

The recent 'skills strategy' White Paper (DfES, 2003) announced that the following steps were being taken to enhance the existing information, advice and guidance (IAG) services for adults to help them access and better understand the range of opportunities available to them to improve their skills:

- Integration of the learndirect national advice service with the work of local IAG services, with all funding for such services being channelled through the Learning and Skills Council.
- Better marketing of IAG services.
- All LSC-funded IAG services to be accredited against a national standard.
- DfES and DWP to bring together labour market information to assist individuals and employers "make choices about learning and work".
- IAG practitioners to be trained in the use of labour market information.

The White Paper's acknowledgement of the importance of IAG services is, of course, very welcome, but the approach is still based upon a perspective which puts the needs and aspirations of individuals in one box, and the workplace in a completely separate box. Clearly, there are individuals who have become

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separated from the workplace for a range of reasons including redundancy, unemployment, a decision to make a change in their working life and so on. In order to re-enter the world of work or change the nature of their existing employment, individuals may need information, advice and guidance about the extent to which their existing skills and experience match labour market vacancies, whether they would benefit from enhancing their competencies, and more general information about the opportunities for work. In these situations, IAG practitioners will need to spend time with the individual client on a one-to-one basis. This model tends, however, to promote a front-loaded view of work-related learning: the individual improves their skills and knowledge and then leaves the guidance arena for the workplace.

The White Paper's plan to provide staff development for guidance practitioners in the use of labour market information is one part of the move towards a strategy which brings guidance closer to the workplace. Yet, once inside the workplace, the individual employee needs to be able to negotiate access to learning opportunities and to make sure their own competencies and potential are recognised. This applies equally, of course, to existing employees. The expansive-restrictive model could be used by guidance practitioners to help employees consider the ways in which the characteristics of their employing organisation are affecting or might affect their learning opportunities. In addition, guidance practitioners could use the model to help employers create a more effective environment for workplace learning and, hence, maximise their employees' potential. One way in which this enhancement of the guidance function could be pursued now is through the Union Learning Representative initiative. Another vehicle could be the Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) in colleges of further education as they work to develop education and training provision in closer partnership with employers.

Concluding Remarks

In this lecture, I have argued that the workplace is major site for learning but that many organisations could do far more to create effective learning environments for all their employees. In addition, organisations are not making enough use of the learning potential of their workforce. Every organisation is different, with its own culture, history, pattern of work organisation and skill distribution, and product market strategy. These features combine to produce environments which are more or less likely to foster learning.

Encouraging individuals to increase their skill levels will not, on its own, improve a country's economic prosperity. If individuals do respond to such a call but find that their newly forged competencies are ignored by employers, then they will become disillusioned with the process and with future calls to aid the country's skills' crisis. It is the workplaces that have to change, for, as the opening quotation to this lecture notes, most jobs are not big enough for people.

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