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Workplace learning in
context: How organisations
and individuals intersect

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Workplace learning and the role of VET
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Background

- Policy makers' concern with strengthening relationships education systems/economy/workplace learning/economic performance
- Relationship between higher level qualifications and improved performance assumed in Human Capital Theory

BUT

- Companies have a range of strategies for increasing profits which do not necessarily rely on investment in skills
- Increase in workforce qualifications not reflected in employers' demand for them
- Qualifications only capture certain kinds of learning
- Eraut et al (1998) learning opportunities afforded by the workplace affect the quantity and quality of learning

Background

- ❑ Significance of the workplace as a site of learning
- ❑ But its primary purpose is the production of goods and services, not learning
- ❑ Competitive strategy drives HRM and training decision-making
- ❑ Training and learning of the workforce are a third order priority for managers
- ❑ Perspective from Industrial Relations: unitarist; pluralist (Fox, 1966) and radical frames of reference

Background

- Workers and employers' needs for workplace learning are not the same: consensus needs to be constructed rather than assumed. Training usually an arena of employer prerogative.
- Learning = embedded in production and labour processes, social relations between employees, different forms of participation, social and collective character.
- >questions about structuring of opportunities and barriers amongst different occupational groups

Structure

- The wider context of workplace learning
- The workplace as a learning environment
- Different types of knowledge in educational and workplace settings
- How individuals intersect with the wider organisation
- Conclusion

The wider context of workplace learning

- Significance of wider social institutions in promoting investment in training and establishing mechanisms for distributing resources for training (e.g. societal approach; business systems approach)
- Role of state in shaping education and training system, wider framework of labour law, employee entitlements, employer obligations and industrial policy: structuring effect which is long-lasting > path dependence
- For many groups of workers, participation in learning at work is limited.

The workplace as a learning environment

- Workplace: provides opportunities for co-participation
- Learning is socially situated (cf Lave and Wenger, 1991), not just an individual activity
- Workplaces: structured and structuring environments for learning, interventions have intended and unintended consequences
- Link between individual and organisational development: expansive/restrictive learning environments (Fuller and Unwin, 2004) – engagement in multiple communities of practice within and beyond the workplace; organisation of jobs to foster co-construction of knowledge and expertise; access to underpinning/theoretical knowledge

Different types of knowledge in educational and workplace settings

- Cf earlier discussion of policy focus on educational qualifications and economic performance. Neglect of vocational knowledge. Issues around control and content of vocational curriculum. Young (2004) three approaches:
 - knowledge-based (e.g. sciences);
 - standards-based (problem of accessing rules governing production and acquisition of theoretical knowledge);
 - connective (needs to recognise codified knowledge of subjects and disciplines AND implicit/tacit knowledge acquired in workplaces (Young))

How individuals intersect with the wider organisation

- Eraut (2004) different knowledge cultures in education (codified, can be tested) and workplace (more holistic and tacit) problem of transfer of theoretical knowledge underestimated
>significance of practice development roles
- Cf Evans et al. 2004 skills are gained not just through formal education and work experience but through life experiences. These skills are tacit and may not be recognised by the individual or others as being valuable. If 'hidden dimensions of learning and skill are made visible', can increase learners' confidence and support success in learning. A source of learner self-confidence but also dangers of making tacit knowledge, a source of resistance to exploitation, explicit?

Conclusion

- Focus on the learner in the workplace, the process of learning and a range of sources of learning rather than structured and intentional interventions by teachers and trainers.
- But individuals learn as members of social groups: workplace a site for participation in the social relations of production.
- Interests of different stakeholders in the workplace are not the same.
- Not just about extent to which the state intervenes to support training; also support for changes in work organisation implications of changes in employment relationship for learning (e.g. labour market deregulation, sub-contracting)
- Developing tools for thinking about workplace learning and vocational knowledge.
- Focus on the transfer of different forms of tacit and explicit knowledge between settings.