

# **"There are workplace trainers and then there are workplace trainers": Reconceptualising their role as workers and trainers**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Policy makers and governments, as part of the implementation of training reform, recognised the importance of ensuring that learners in workplaces should have access to, and support from, suitably qualified workplace trainers. One of the first sets of competency standards to be developed in the early days of training reform was for workplace trainers (CSB-Assessor and Workplace Trainers 1994). Since that time, the role of the workplace trainer, although central to issues relating to the quality of vocational education and training (VET), have received scant attention. This is particularly true for those people who train others in the workplace in a manner which is largely informal and undertaken as part of the work routine in an enterprise rather than as part of more formalised training either within or away from the work site.

Previous research on the integration of on and off-job training in the housing industry found that apprentices desired different skills for their workplace trainers than they were able or willing to provide (Harris et al. 1997). A recent study has drawn attention to the pervasiveness of informal learning in the workplace and the important role played by workers in fostering the learning of their work colleagues (Harris and Simons 1999). This has raised some significant questions with regard to the role of the workplace trainer and how that role might be conceptualised.

In the light of the above mentioned research, this paper commences with a critique of the current conception of the role of workplace trainer as presented in the Training Package for Assessment and Workplace Training. Distinctions are drawn between different types of workplace trainers. Using network learning theory (Van der Krogt 1998, Poell et al. 1998) as a foundation, a model highlighting how workplace trainers act on and with the learning and work networks in their enterprises to facilitate learning is presented and discussed.

## **CURRENT CONCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF WORKPLACE TRAINER**

The competency standards for assessors and workplace trainers are an official and public statement of the role of the workplace trainer. These standards describe the key functions of the role and place a boundary around its scope, effectively defining what is 'in' and what lies 'outside' the work of a trainer.

The purpose underpinning the development of the initial workplace trainer standards was essentially practical, focusing on assisting those responsible for hiring and training workplace trainers (Garrick and McDonald 1992). These standards have undergone further refinement and are now contained within the Training Package for Assessment and Workplace Training that was released early in 1999.

Both the earlier and current versions of the standards have been based upon a "skills deficit notion" of training that is more reminiscent of institutionalised approaches to skill formation (Garrick and McDonald 1992, 176). They appear to lack any real links with emerging ideas such as the learning organisation (Senge 1990, Bawden 1991) or the body of knowledge which emphasises learning embedded in daily work practices and occurring in an informal or incidental manner (Marsick, 1987; Marsick and Watkins 1990; Harris et al. 1998). We would contend that this is particularly so for those workers for whom the role of trainer forms only a portion of their overall work role. For these people the standards most relevant to their role first appeared as Workplace Trainer Category 1 competency standards earlier in the 1990s, and now have been refined and released (early in 1999) as a unit of competency, 'Train small groups', within the Training Package for Assessment and Workplace Training.

This unit conceptualises the workplace trainer's role as one where the trainer is 'in control' of training ('specific training needs are identified', 'training objectives are matched to identified competency development needs', 'practice opportunities are provided', 'readiness for assessment is monitored'). This is further underscored by the almost overwhelming emphasis on training rather than learning. That is, the unit assumes that the learning that results from training is predictable, explicit and has outcomes that can be determined in advance. Formalised on-site training is valued almost to the exclusion of informal and incidental learning processes. There is also an implicit assumption relating to power relations embedded in these standards - that the trainer knows best, has the legitimate authority and is the one with the 'right' knowledge and skill. A structure is imposed on the learning and the focus is clearly on individual workers/learners in isolation from their work environment and their work colleagues. The unit, "Train small groups", is also remarkable in that it bears distinct similarities with another unit within the Training Package that focuses on the competencies required to deliver training sessions as part of a training program. It therefore raises questions about the specific competencies that a workplace trainer, whose training role sits alongside his/her role as a worker, may need to develop.

It is acknowledged that the range of variables may allow space and the room to manoeuvre for some of the trainer actions identified in this research. However, interpretation is left to the individual trainer. The key point is that the *raison d'être* for identifying and describing competency standards is to define what it is that workers (in this case, trainers) actually do in the workplace and to minimise the need for individual interpretation. Thus a set of competency standards that does not do this is no better than definitions of the role of workplace trainers that existed prior to the introduction of national competency standards. In a real sense, these competency standards seem to be a-contextual, framed in *vacuo* and devoid of the workplace. There is a need to put 'work' back into notions of the 'workplace trainer'. They may well be trainer competency standards, but they fall short of being 'workplace' trainer competency standards.

## **AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF WORKPLACE TRAINER**

Research recently completed as part of an NREC-funded project to examine the role of the workplace trainer provides evidence from which an alternative view of the role of workplace trainer may be constructed (Harris et al. 2000). This research involved observations and interviews in 18 enterprises where workplace trainers were facilitating learning with one or two employees/learners. The enterprises were in three industries: information technology, real estate, and building and construction, and spread across three Australian states: New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. From this process, a number of key functions and "trainer actions" were identified. A telephone interview survey of workplace trainers in 350 enterprises across the same three states was then conducted so as to complement information from the first stage, particularly focusing on the trainer actions (full details of the research process and outcomes have been reported elsewhere - see Harris and Simons 1999).

From this research, it is possible to identify a number of functions that are central to the role of the workplace trainer. Within structured learning systems in enterprises, workplace trainers prepare for, deliver and review training using a range of competencies that are set out in the current workplace assessor and trainer competency standards. It is also clear that these standards only describe part of their role, particularly for those workplace trainers where training is only one small part of their overall work. Five other key functions of the workplace trainer role were identified in this research.

### **1. Fostering an environment conducive to learning**

Trainers are very aware that the workplace environment plays a significant role in supporting learning and the importance of actively cultivating relationships with and between workers as a key component of their work. These relationships are evident in the communication systems that trainers build and maintain. Communication is the main vehicle for training and the primary mechanism through which an environment that supported and encouraged learning is maintained. This form of communication is not often laced with 'training talk' (that is, talk about objectives, assessment, demonstrations and other concepts associated with more formal approaches to training).

Trainers also spend large amounts of time talking to workers. Discussions can take place at almost any time during the working day and in a variety of environments, such as the car on the way to and from various work sites at lunch time. These discussions form the basis of decisions about the type of work that the worker might undertake. They provide opportunities for trainers to understand the

experience of work from the worker's perspective. Trainers use discussions to share how tasks might be done or what they would like workers to do. They open up opportunities for trainers and workers to explore alternative ways of tackling parts of a job or for the trainer to assist the worker in making connections between events and tasks in order to assist in transferring learning to new or novel situations.

## **2. Working and learning with co-workers**

Many workplace trainers are not in positions where training forms the major part of their work. In most instances, the trainers work alongside the workers they are training. Alternatively, they work in jobs that have a supervisory component. The 'work worlds' of the trainer and the workers they are training are enmeshed and interact with each other and shape the teaching process trainers use. The ability of the trainers to interact with workers within this learning-work system is a critical component of their role.

Trainers share experiences such as attending events together, telling 'war stories' and working alongside workers. They network and build relationships with other workers and people external to the business or the section of the enterprise with which they are most immediately involved. These networks and contacts often provide help with issues or problems, or provide input about changes that could be made to work practices or other issues within the enterprise. These other workers or external people provide learning opportunities for all the workers connected with the business.

## **3. Structuring and shaping the work processes to accommodate learning**

The work of many workplace trainers is enmeshed with their primary work roles within the enterprise. The *nature* and *structure* of the work within the enterprise is therefore a critical factor shaping the learning that takes place. The workflow, patterns and structure are the developmental pathway (that is, the curriculum) which the trainer uses. Trainers manipulate the flow, structure and content of work in order to assist those less experienced workers to learn as they work. They do this by:

- altering the pattern and pace of work to make space for learning
- making judgements about the balance between the work and learning needs
- monitoring the work flow and quality of work as learning and tasks proceed
- sequencing the order of work tasks to match the needs abilities of the workers
- reconciling the experience from on- and off-job learning environments

These activities assist the trainer to draw the learners they are working with into the patterns of work. They also help trainers to connect tasks in a manner that facilitates "getting the task done" alongside the task of helping others to "learn their job".

## **4. Promoting independence and self-direction in workers**

As stated previously, many of the workplace trainers in this study had a number of responsibilities within their enterprises, apart from their training roles. It is therefore important that they encourage and foster independence and self-direction in the workers. Negotiating tasks, workloads and learning goals, as a prelude to organising work patterns and structures, is an important task for the trainers. In this way they can allow workers to proceed with the work and free up the trainer to attend to other issues.

## **5. Linking external learning experiences with work and learning in the workplace**

Workplace trainers who work with external providers of training programs, particularly those that involve contracts of training, report that their role also involves liaison with these providers on a range of issues. Trainers also play an important role in supporting workers to integrate their learning from sites other than the workplace. This function can require a workplace trainer to speak with external providers to provide feedback, negotiate alternative assessment tasks or report progress against competencies achieved. In other circumstances, the workplace trainer can discuss what training the worker is undertaking outside of the workplace and look for opportunities where work practices might be modified to accommodate these learning experiences.

The additional functions identified in research provide support for the argument that the role of the workplace trainer is broader and more complex than might be suggested in descriptions embedded in

documents such as the competency standards for assessors and workplace trainers. The data indicate that the role of the workplace trainer is shaped by the work of the particular enterprise and that the work of the trainer is embedded in the work of the enterprise. The work is the curriculum that the workplace trainer adopts and adapts to suit the needs of the workers.

It is also clear that there are significant differences between the worker-trainer and the provider-based trainer (and even the enterprise-based designated trainer). While there is an increasing press for provider-based staff (for example, TAFE teachers) to become more entrepreneurial and to 'get out into industry', there is a need to recognise that their role is different from that of a workplace trainer. The workplace-based trainer is enmeshed in both the work and the learning networks of the enterprise and these greatly influence both the nature of the role and degree to which the trainer can fulfil it. The trainer is also a worker. The provider-based trainer is not situated within an enterprise's work network and thus plays a different role. Simply put, the 'outsider' is in a different position from the 'insider', and therefore by necessity plays a different part in the theatre of training. There are advantages and disadvantages for both. For example, the outsider is considerably less affected by the possible constraints of intra-enterprise networks than the enterprise-based trainer. On the other hand, the outsider is also very likely to be less effective by virtue of more limited understanding of the structures, processes, relationships, values and so on, and therefore needs to spend more time and effort in enculturating himself/herself within the enterprise. The main point here is that the current national competency standards reflect a "one size fits all" approach that does not tune with the various types of trainer that exist.

## **TOWARDS A MODEL FOR UNDERSTANDING WORKPLACE TRAINERS AND THEIR WORK**

Network learning theory offers new and valuable insights into understanding the relationships between learning and work within an enterprise. Network learning theory emphasises the dynamic and interrelated nature of the learning and work networks and the role that individuals play in creating and re-creating these networks over time. Drawing on this theory and the insights gained from the data collected in this study, a new understanding of the role of the workplace trainer who is based in an enterprise becomes possible.

Network learning theory (Van der Krogt *et al.* 1998, Poell *et al.* 1998) rests on a number of key ideas:

- Enterprises comprise a number of networks that correspond to the main functions they undertake. These networks are constantly being shaped and re-shaped by the people who work within the enterprise.
- In understanding learning in the workplace, two networks are of particular importance - the learning network and the work network. The work network evolves out of ways in which workers interact with policies, organise and work within the enterprise. Work networks are shaped by the type of work undertaken in the enterprise as well as the relationships between workers and the climate created by interactions of workers within the enterprise. The learning network is a result of workers acting on the structures (both formal and informal) and planning processes that have been established within the enterprise to support learning. What is learned, along with the relationships and the climate which is generated to support learning, all contribute to the 'shape' of the learning network.
- Different types of enterprises are characterised by different work and learning networks.

Within most enterprises, the overriding concern of workplace trainers and their colleagues is to "get the job done". Productivity and "core" business activities are of pre-eminent concern. This is especially important in small and micro businesses. As network learning theory highlights, this effectively means that the work network predominates, sometimes at the expense of the learning that might take place. Work shapes learning.

Learning networks are significant in shaping the role of the workplace trainer in an enterprise. In some cases, the workplace trainer is a key player in this network, as in the case of a trainer who is part of a human resource department in an enterprise. In other instances, the workplace trainer is predominantly a worker and the work structures, processes and content shape and limit the time and energy they can devote to facilitating learning. Hence their actions contribute to shaping a different type of learning network. The role of the workplace trainer can also be shaped indirectly through the actions of external organisations such as registered training organisations and other bodies. These

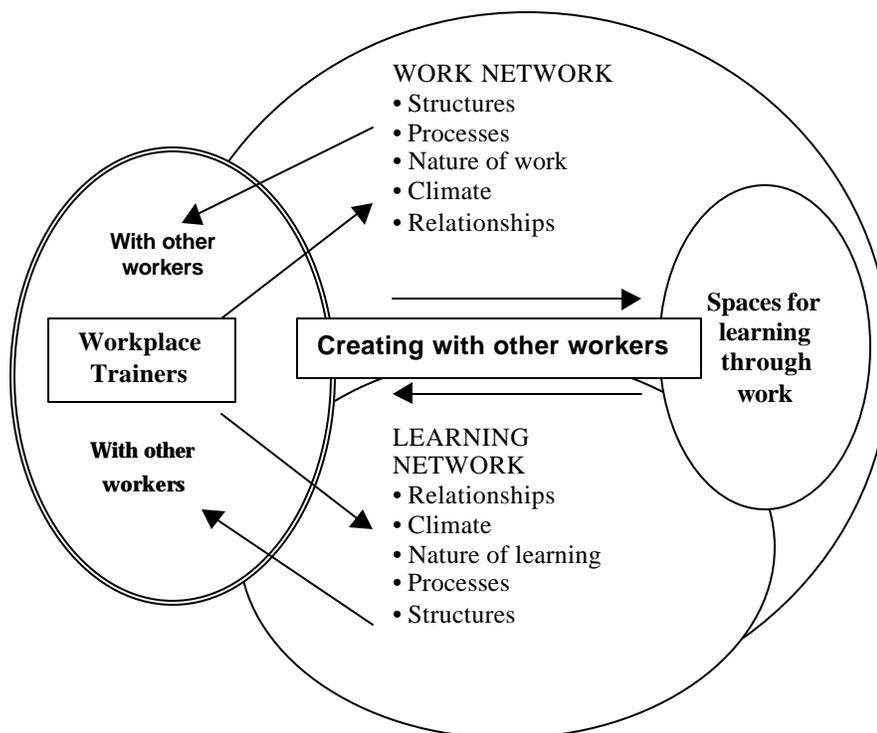
external organisations act to shape the nature of the learning network that may be developed in an enterprise by supporting structures, for example, through traineeships, apprenticeships or other training programs.

In small and micro businesses, where there is often not the resources to establish learning networks supported by human resource structures, the workplace trainer, in conjunction with other workers, shapes the learning network that emerges over time. Ways of helping people to learn in an organisation often do not bear any resemblance to formal approaches to training that might be observed in institutional or other off-job settings. Learning is usually not shaped by objectives, assessment processes or structured opportunities for practice. Rather learning

- emerges idiosyncratically from the work structures, processes and content; and
- is shaped by the workplace climate and the relationships between workers.

The learning network in an enterprise is created by the actions of the workplace trainer in conjunction with other workers. Within these networks, the trainers have a unique but defined role that encompasses a range of different types of learning situations. Through their actions on the learning and work networks within an enterprise, workplace trainers are able to create, support and maintain spaces in which they support the learning of their work colleagues either as individuals or as groups of workers (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The role of the workplace trainer in an enterprise**



**Legend**

The work network consists of the following components:

<i>Structures</i>	ways in which power, roles and responsibilities in relation to work are distributed in the enterprise
<i>Processes</i>	ways in which work tasks are planned, organised and implemented by the workers
<i>Nature of work</i>	type of work being undertaken within the enterprise, for example, repetitive jobs, broad jobs, variable jobs, complex jobs
<i>Climate</i>	values, beliefs and rules that govern the way people act in the workplace;

	climate can be influenced by specific workplace policies and legislative requirements
<i>Relationships</i>	values and rules that underpin the way people relate to each other during work, including communication patterns, flow, content, etc.

The learning network consists of the following components:

<i>Relationships</i>	values and rules that underpin the way people involved in learning communicate and relate to each other; these relationships will embody the stance and ways of thinking that individuals hold in relation to learning and facilitating the learning of work colleagues
<i>Climate</i>	values, beliefs and rules that underpin learning within an enterprise
<i>Nature of learning</i>	learning that is available within an enterprise; this can include both formal and informal opportunities for learning, as well as those that might be implemented with the assistance of external bodies such as registered training organisations
<i>Processes</i>	ways in which training and/or learning opportunities are planned, organised and implemented within an enterprise; this also includes the development and implementation of training policies
<i>Structures</i>	ways in which power, roles and responsibilities in relation to facilitating learning or providing training are distributed in the enterprise.

Our sequencing of the different components within the learning and work networks is deliberate. Other studies (Harris et al. 1998) have emphasised the high value that learners place on the relationships they have with their workplace trainers. Similarly, in this study, the ways in which roles and responsibilities for work are distributed throughout the enterprise (for example, whether the workplace trainer is also the owner of the business) impacts significantly on the work network established within that enterprise. It could be hypothesised that, within the context of an enterprise, the major components of both the learning and work networks take on more or less significance and exert differing amounts of influence on the overall shape of the networks that are built within it. Further research could be conducted to unearth the relative contribution of each component within the learning and work networks to their overall character and how differently constructed learning and work networks contribute to the overall quality of learning that occurs in the workplace.

## CONCLUSION

Workplace trainers operate in complex and multi-faceted environments. For some trainers, human resource departments and interaction with external training organisations shape learning networks that are amenable to much of the current VET national reform agenda. For many other workplace trainers, and especially those in small and micro enterprises, their role is quite different. In these contexts, an effective workplace trainer is aware of the impact of the work network on learning in their enterprise and how the work network can be shaped and reshaped by their actions in supporting learning. The workplace trainer has a key role to play in assisting the altering of the 'shape' of work structures, processes, relationships, content and climate to accommodate learning in the workplace. An effective workplace trainer is able to create and shape work so that learning is possible.

We believe that the notion of the 'one size fits all' trainer as embodied in the current competency standards needs to be strongly challenged. People who are responsible for delivering training in settings which are supported by formal learning networks may be well served by existing competency standards. For other workplace trainers, however, it is important to think realistically about what is happening in their enterprises with respect to power relations, roles and the economic imperatives that drive the ways they work. It is also important to take into account the full context of an enterprise when considering training. Too often training is considered as an entity on its own, without embedding it in its context, as if it existed in the same form everywhere.

It is also time to acknowledge that the goal of promoting training / learning cultures will also require clear consideration and recognition be given to informal learning. To chat benignly about learning organisation being those where learning is co-terminous with work, or attempt to implement formal training using a top-down, deficit approach only addresses part of the entire training activity in which enterprises are involved. The first approach lacks reality and may be destined to remain in glossy managerial documents as an attractive philosophy with a growing gap between rhetoric and reality. The second is somewhat colonial and is appropriate only for certain types of organisational culture. It also 'sells short' the complex work of training in the workplace and the multiple roles that workplace

trainers in all their diversity undertake in their enterprises. There are, indeed, trainers and workplace trainers.

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