

LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE
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Research Summary for House of Commons Committee

Objectives

1. To collect and analyse evidence from organisations in engineering, business and health care about the development of knowledge and skills in employment.
2. To develop research methods for investigating learning in employment.
3. To develop a framework for interpreting the findings and guiding future research

Approach

The focus was on learning rather than on training. Evidence was collected from 120 managers, professionals and technicians in 12 organisations who each took part in two interviews held six to 12 months apart. The interviews began by asking about the nature of the respondent's job, recent tasks and problems; went on to discuss the nature of the expertise required to do the job; and asked how the necessary expertise had been acquired; and what factors had facilitated or constrained this learning. Questions were also asked about different ways of learning and memorable learning incidents.

Main Findings

The learner-centred perspective showed that formal education and training provide only a small part of what is learned at work. Most of the learning described in the interviews was informal, neither clearly specified nor planned. It arose naturally out of the demands and challenges of work - solving problems, improving quality and/or productivity, or coping with change - and out of social interactions in the workplace with colleagues, customers or clients. Responding to such challenges entails both working and learning. One cannot be separated from the other. In retrospect it may be described as **learning from experience**.

Much learning at work derives its purpose and direction from the goals of the work, which are normally achieved by a combination of thinking, trying things out and talking to other people. Sometimes, however, people recognise a need for some additional knowledge or skill that seems essential for improving the quality of their work, expanding its range or taking on new duties. Learning goals are identified which they pursue by a combination of self-directed learning and taking advantage of relevant learning opportunities as and when they appear. Although this can involve some formal training being undertaken, it almost always requires learning from experience and from other people at work.

Learning from other people is sometimes facilitated by organised learning support which may be organised formally by the centre or informally at local level. Apprenticeships and trainee

schemes are usually organised centrally. Mentoring, shadowing, coaching are more likely to be arranged locally, and they are generally more effective this way. The most common form of learning from other people takes the form of consultation and collaboration within the immediate working group: this may include teamwork, ongoing mutual consultation and support or observation of others in action. Beyond the immediate work environment, people sought information and advice, from other people in their organisation, from customers or suppliers or from wider professional networks. This was often done on a reciprocal basis. Only a minority made frequent use of written or audiovisual materials like manuals, videos or computer-based training. The rest tried to circumvent materials by getting the information they needed from other people.

Working for qualifications and attending short training courses were important for some people at particular stages in their career. But even then, work-based learning was important in developing the ability to use what has been learned off-the-job. This was especially true for short courses, which have very little impact unless they are appropriately timed and properly followed up at work. Generally, initial training was judged better when it was both broad in scope and involved periods in the workplace as well as in the classroom. Mid-career management and professional qualifications were judged highly effective because they were able to build on prior experience at work. Management courses involving small groups and projects played an important role in helping people shift their thinking from operational to a strategic level.

Policy Implications

Knowledge is situated in the context where it is acquired and requires further learning for its transfer. Much working knowledge is tacit and explicit versions of it fail to recognise its complexity. Informal learning arises out of social situations, but most of these are more transient than implied by the euphemistic metaphor of a 'community of practice'.

A group climate for learning must therefore be created quickly and needs to be sustained by deliberate action and recreated at regular intervals. Individual learning also depends on confidence, motivation and capability - especially when capability is viewed as something to be acquired rather than something innate. This in turn depends on people's work having the appropriate degree of challenge, on how they are managed and on the micro-culture of the immediate work environment.

The local manager strongly influences group climate and individual dispositions. But local managers are rarely trained for this important aspect of the job. To appoint managers and develop them for this role would be a highly significant move towards the promotion of learning in the workplace.

The amount of learning at work could be increased in order to realise the aspirations conveyed by the rhetoric of the **learning organisation** or **The Learning Society**. But this depends on knowing how much is already happening, how much could be encouraged to happen, and the factors that affect learning at work. Current thinking about lifelong learning puts too much emphasis on formal learning contexts and learning for credit. Governments find it much easier to

influence formal education and training but such policy should be formulated in the knowledge of the importance of informal learning and checked out for its possible effects on this type of learning.

The term ‘non-learner’ to describe non-participants in formal education should be banned from government publications for both practical and psychological reasons.

Policies for post-qualification education and training should be reviewed for their congruency with the promotion of lifelong learning by both formal and informal means, especially policies pertaining to funding and qualifications.

All learners from 14 onwards should be learning in a variety of contexts as essential preparation for lifelong learning, since learning in the workplace is very different in kind from learning in school or college learning in one context will not easily transfer to the other, nor will knowledge and skill transfer without being resituated in the new context. A significant amount of preparation for work will have to be undertaken in employment in the absence of greater variety of learning contexts. To pretend otherwise would be to deceive the public and limit the quality of the outcomes of general and vocational education.

Key Publications

ERAUT, M. (1997a) Perspectives on defining “The Learning Society”, *Journal of Educational Policy* 12, 6, pp.551-558.

ERAUT, M. (1997b) Curriculum Frameworks and Assumptions in 16-19 Education, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 2 (3), pp 281-297.

ERAUT, M, ALDERTON, J, COLE, G, SENKER, P (1998b) “Learning from Other People at Work”. In F. Coffield (ed) *Learning at Work*, Bristol, Policy Press. [Reprinted in R Harrison, F Reeve, A Hanson & Clarke (eds) *Supporting lifelong learning, Vol 1 Perspectives on Learning*, Open University with Routledge, London, 127-145]

ERAUT, M, ALDERTON, J, COLE, G, SENKER, P (1999) “The Impact of the Manager on Learning in the Workplace.” In Coffield, F (ed), *Speaking Truth to Power: Research and Policy on Lifelong Learning*, Bristol, Policy Press. [Reprinted in F Reeve, M Cartwright & R Edwards (eds) *Supporting lifelong learning, Vol 2, Organising Learning*, Open University with Routledge, London, 91-108]

ERAUT, M, ALDERTON, J, COLE, G, SENKER, P (2001) “Development of Knowledge and Skills at Work”. In Coffield, F (ed), *Differing Visions of a Learning Society, Vol 1*, Policy Press: Bristol, pp 231-262.