

Learning through work: developmental on-the-job learning as a vehicle to widen participation in workplace learning

Position paper for the Widening Participation Unit

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Abstract

Constraints around resourcing and staff-release make on-the-job learning central to widening participation. Typically though, on-the-job learning is narrowly focused on task-competence. Broader, more developmental on-the-job learning is needed. Research suggests that much learning at work takes place through interactions. Many of these interactions are associated with participative people management. A system of on-the-job learning integrated with participative people management has the potential to deliver genuinely developmental learning, focused on the information processing and communication skills needed for effective management of work activity. Such a system is aligned to organisational business objectives and can impact positively on individual and collective performance. It addresses many of the barriers that currently limit participation and could become the driving force of a more inclusive learning culture within the NHS and beyond.

1. Modelling a system of developmental on-the-job learning

1. NHS support staff have an important role to play in service modernisation. Yet sustainable, mainstreamed learning for support staff is limited. This restricts efforts to escalate skills, enhance productivity and improve patient services. The National Director for Widening Participation concludes that learning for support staff is not sufficiently prioritised by employer-organisations and, in his first report, *Learning for a Change in Healthcare*, seeks to 'mobilise learning, and wider participation in learning, as a major element of health service reform and planned transformation.'¹

2. To achieve this aim, *Learning for a Change in Healthcare* calls for the close alignment of learning to the business objectives of employer-organisations and recommends actions to create organisational learning cultures. Particular attention, the report says, should be paid to basic skills.

3. The Leitch review of skills has identified similar issues in the economy as a whole, noting employers' reluctance to invest in training for staff in low-skilled roles. Leitch has also prioritised action on basic skills and called on employers to release staff from work to gain basic skills and level 2 qualifications. Ultimately, however, Leitch sees raising management demand for skills as the solution to the UK's low-skills problem and looks to the adoption by employers of high performance work practices to achieve this.

4. In the NHS meanwhile, significant barriers to widening participation include management attitudes and resourcing constraints. While management attitudes may be changed by the alignment of learning to business objectives, resourcing constraints present a considerable challenge, particularly in relation to study leave (i.e. release from work for learning) for staff in low-skilled roles. Recent Widening Participation work on the implementation of the KSF has recognised that on-the-job learning is one of the few avenues open to widen participation: 'On-the-job and in-house learning will be the main way forward but is not an easy option. The development of a work-based learning infrastructure so that this kind of activity is built into expectations will be necessary.'²

5. Moreover, on-the-job learning is strongly associated with a narrow focus on task competence (that is, on skills for tasks within the existing job). Widening Participation aims to promote learning that develops the critical thinking and communication skills that enable support staff to take on more demanding responsibilities, either through role enlargement or career progression. Although on-the-job learning is consistent with operating constraints and can be clearly aligned to an employer-organisation's business objectives, for it to become the driving force of an inclusive learning culture it must be genuinely developmental.

6. Recent research into workplace learning, participative people management and workplace basic skills suggests how such a system of developmental on-the-job learning might be constructed, consistent with the aims of both *Learning for a Change in Healthcare* and the Leitch review.

¹ Fryer, R. H. (2006) *Learning for a Change in Healthcare* DH pi ES4

² WPIILSU (2007) Briefing Note 7: *Implementation of the KSF and Widening Participation in Learning in the NHS*

7. Organisations are dynamic entities that can be defined by the active process of organising. This process brings individual members together continuously to reappraise and renegotiate collective aims and objectives. The process takes place partly through formal organisational processes and partly through the daily interactions incidental to the management of work activity. Members co-ordinate their efforts on the basis of this process and recognition of that has led to the development of participative people management practices.

8. These practices, which include appraisal, team working, work-based learning and flexible working, underpin the concept of high performance working. High performance working aims to raise productivity through better work organisation rather than work intensification. There is increasing acceptance that participative people management practices, appropriately configured, engage employees and impact positively on performance. They achieve this by fulfilling two related functions. One is to ensure individuals have the ability, motivation and opportunity to participate in workplace activity. The other is to communicate how individual roles and responsibilities relate to the aims and objectives of the organisation (that is, the 'job' in its largest sense). These functions are equally important to high and low-skilled workplaces: performance in both requires able and motivated individuals who understand how their organisation works.

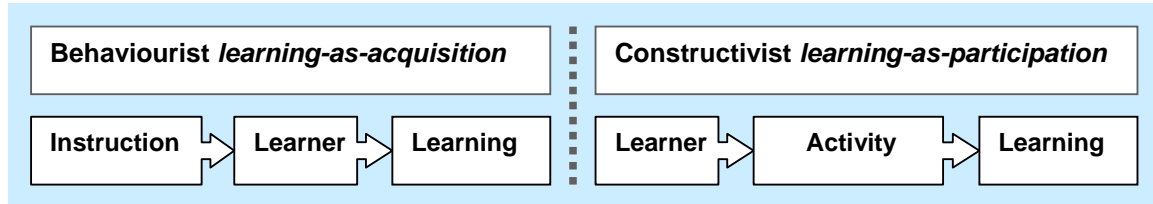
9. Members construct their understanding of the organisation out of their experience of both people management processes and daily work activity (including the interactions with colleagues, supervisors and customers that arise from it). This constitutes a kind of learning-*about*-the-job. It is on-going and the lessons learned are subject to constant revision, according to the member's most recent experiences within the organisation. Good learning-*about*-the-job (e.g. 'I understand how my work contributes to collective goals; I think those goals are worth achieving; my colleagues value the contribution I make') predisposes individuals to work collaboratively. It also is critical to employee engagement. Engagement occurs when, in addition to having the ability, motivation and opportunity to participate, an individual understands how their work contributes to the organisation and feels aligned with the values and objectives of the organisation. Engagement (that is, the degree to which the individual treats their work as meaningful and motivating) thus serves as a measure of the quality of an individual's experience in the organisation.

10. Engagement is also central to the rich learning that research, over the past two to three decades, has revealed occurs in the workplace, outside of any classroom, through work activity and the interactions that surround work. To differentiate it from learning-*about*-the-job, this sort of learning might be termed learning-*in*-the-job. It is best understood through a constructivist model of learning-as-participation.

11. The constructivist model understands learning as the outcome of engagement in goal-directed activity. According to this model, the learner develops new abilities by thinking-and-acting to achieve goals. The learner is the active agent of this process and a condition for learning is the learner's affective engagement in the activity. This constructivist model can be contrasted with a behaviourist

learning-as-acquisition model, in which learning is equated with the transmission of knowledge and skills from instructor to learner, who becomes the relatively passive subject of the process. (See figure 1 below.)

Figure 1. Models of learning

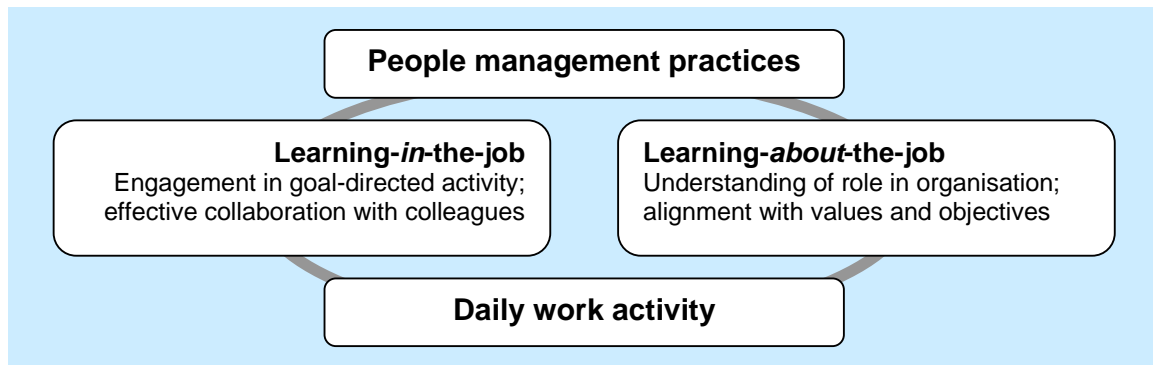


12. When learning is understood in this way, it 'is no longer a separate activity that occurs either before one enters the workplace or in remote classroom settings. Nor is it an activity preserved for the managerial group. The behaviours that define learning and behaviours that define being productive are one and the same. Learning is not something that requires time out from being engaged in productive activity; learning is the heart of productive activity.'³

13. Learning-*about*-the-job and learning-*in*-the-job depend upon and reinforce each other. For individuals to perceive their work as meaningful (learning-*in*-the-job), they must understand how it supports collective aims and objectives, with which they feel aligned. Learning-*about*-the-job enables both understanding and alignment. Yet without engagement in daily work activity (learning-*in*-the-job), understanding and alignment (learning-*about*-the-job) must be severely limited.

14. This suggests that both learning-*about* and learning-*in*-the-job are necessary if an organisation and its members are to maximise their potential. Good learning-*about*-the-job enables effective collaboration between individuals. Effective collaboration supports individual engagement in work activity. Engagement in work activity unlocks the learning potential of work activity. Learning-*in*-the-job engages individuals in their work. Individual engagement supports effective collaboration between individuals to achieve organisational goals. (See figure 2 below.)

Figure 2. Learning-*about*-the-job and learning-*in*-the-job



³ Zuboff, S (1988) *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power* New York p395

15. The model described above shows learning as both an outcome and an organising principle of people and performance management. It also indicates the potential of these functions in relation to developmental on-the-job learning. Moreover, while these functions may not typically be viewed from the perspective of learning, they are consciously structured to enable competence, individual and collective. They do this by

- Communicating the aims and objectives (organisational and individual) of work activity
- Communicating the knowledge and skills required for work activity by individuals
- Planning personal development to ensure individuals' ability to apply the requisite knowledge and skills
- Monitoring and supporting the performance of individuals and work groups
- Giving systematic, structured feedback on the application of knowledge and skills
- Supporting individuals and work groups to improve their application of knowledge and skills
- Supporting individuals and work groups to develop their knowledge and skills.

Taken together, adequately resourced and fully implemented, the practices might in themselves constitute a system of developmental on-the-job learning. However, resourcing and other constraints typically limit their implementation, particularly in relation to low-skilled roles. Nevertheless, organisations generally acknowledge the value of the practices and they offer at least a coherent, organisationally-approved framework for developmental on-the-job learning.

16. Situating any system of developmental on-the-job learning within this framework serves also to support and reinforce the practices themselves. This is an important consideration, given the link between engagement and learning. Meaningful participation in as broad a range of workplace activity as possible must be a key objective for developmental on-the-job learning. Meeting that objective depends on functioning participative people and performance management practices. On-the-job learning takes place largely through collaborative participation in work activity. Approaching that process systematically can only support participatory practices around the management of work activity (and, by extension, the collaborative working that enhances performance).

17. A systematic approach to developmental on-the-job learning has two basic concerns: to create and maintain a workplace environment conducive to learning; and to facilitate the learning of individuals within it. There is some consensus on both in workplace learning research. A workplace conducive to learning is characterised broadly as

- Collaborative and participatory
- Focused on quality, continuous improvement and customer service
- Supportive of individuals and work groups.

More specifically

- information, knowledge and skills are shared
- the contribution to collective goals of all work activity is recognised and valued
- employees are given some autonomy and encouraged to innovate but held accountable
- workplace roles remain as fluid and non-hierarchical as possible

- interactions between members (including those of different status and from different parts of the organisation) are required and encouraged
- work is allocated to teams
- the purpose of work activity is communicated effectively
- work activity offers task variety and opportunity to apply knowledge and skills
- performance is closely supervised
- feedback is given
- development of knowledge and skills is encouraged.

A systematic approach to on-the-job learning must include support for these practices. Regarding the facilitation of individuals' learning within the workplace, there are three significant issues:

- how the learning takes place
- what factors impact on individuals' efficacy as learners and
- how the behaviour of line managers and supervisors affects employee learning.

18. How on-the-job learning typically happens (the first issue) can be described in terms of both learning methods and learning behaviours.

Six main methods of on-the-job learning are recognised. These are

- transmission (direct instruction to pass on knowledge and skills)
- coaching and mentoring
- guided learning (the structuring of workplace experiences to facilitate learning)
- action learning (through reflection and action on workplace problems)
- job rotation/work allocation (learning from new tasks and work settings); and
- participation (unplanned learning arising through participation in workplace activity and communities of practice; this is also described as peripheral participation and sometimes as informal or incidental/accidental learning).

A degree of overlap is observed between some of these methods and in practice, several are often used in combination.

Learning behaviours observed in individuals in the workplace include

- questioning
- discussion
- listening and observation
- reflection
- accessing information
- accessing help from others
- giving and receiving feedback
- using documents, equipment, materials

These behaviours are observed in work tasks as well as performance management and personal development activities more directly associated with learning (such as supervision, shadowing, coaching and mentoring).

19. Research on the second issue, factors affecting individuals' efficacy as learners, highlights

- confidence/self-efficacy
- commitment and motivation
- alignment with values and objectives of work activity
- a level of difficulty that challenges, but does not overwhelm
- support from managers and colleagues
- constructive feedback

and their reciprocal relationship. Impacting on these factors are work organisation, individual capability and personal objectives, interactions and relationships afforded by the workplace.

20. The third issue is the impact of line managers on learning. This is widely recognised to be considerable and often decisive, particularly as organisations devolve the implementation of people management processes to line managers. In relation to learning, research suggests that the importance of managers is not so much as agents of delivery, so to speak, as creators and custodians of a climate favourable to learning. That climate depends on the quality of the workplace interactions (through which learning largely occurs). Manager behaviours that are key to this include:

- allocation and structuring of work activity to provide
 - appropriate levels of challenge for individuals
 - opportunities for interaction and joint working
- clear objective-setting
- giving of support and constructive feedback
- conflict resolution and relationship-building
- informal coaching and mentoring
- proactive support (including advice and guidance) for subordinates' career development.

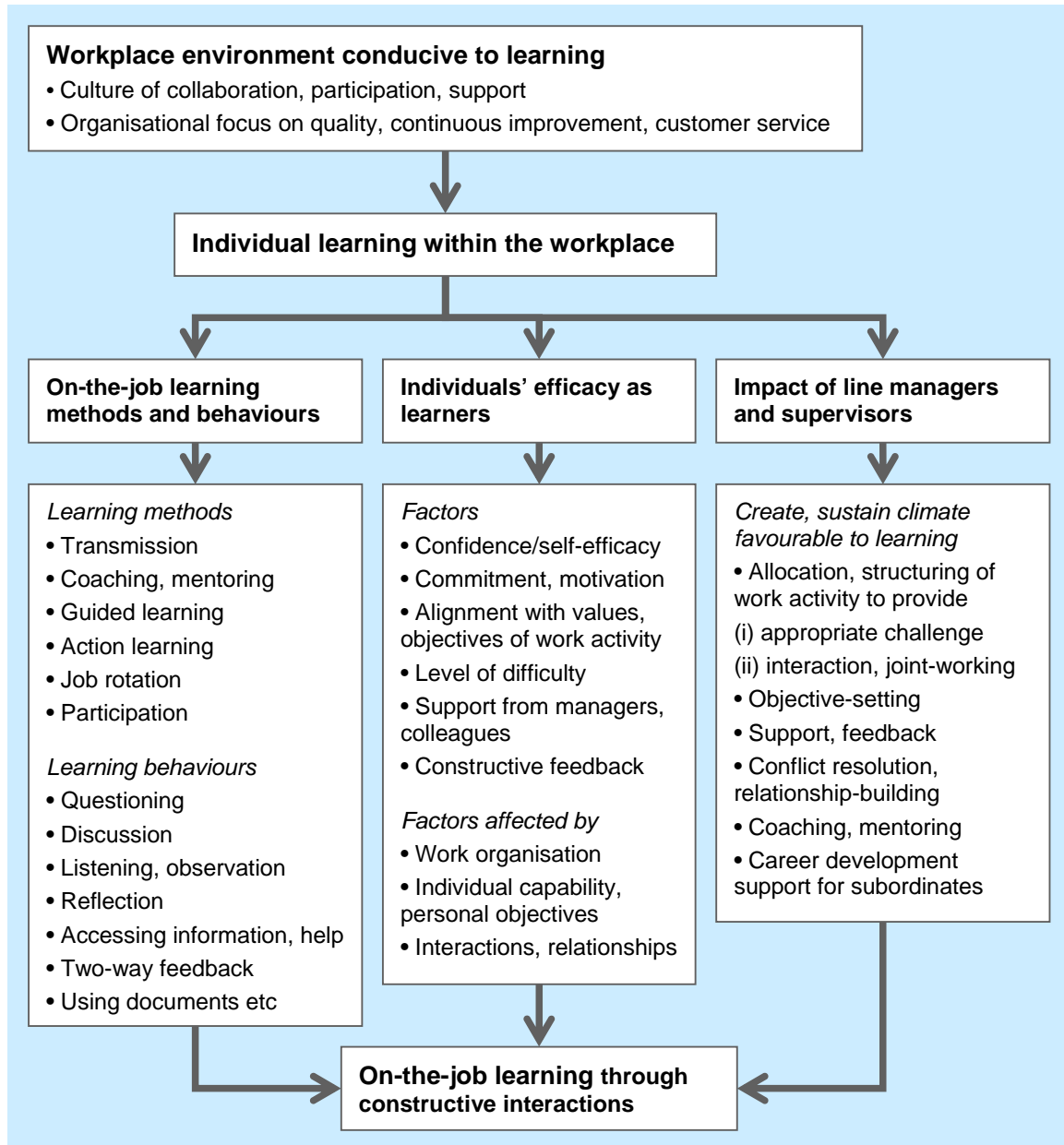
The degree to which managers do these things depends partly on the context they work in and partly on their own understanding of both people management and (workplace) learning.

21. In summary: on-the-job learning depends on and largely takes place through workplace interactions. The nature of work activity, including both its content and its organisation, provides the context for and (to an extent) determines those interactions, but their quality, and therefore the learning they afford, depends significantly on the climate created by line managers. That climate significantly affects individuals' efficacy as learners. Figure 3 below summarises these dynamics.

22. On-the-job learning occurs through interactions that arise from work activity and the management of work activity. These are the same interactions that generate learning-*in* and *about*-the-job and determine the quality of individual participation (and consequently performance). The quality of these interactions depends significantly on individuals' information processing and communication skills. These are the skills that allow individuals to interact with organisational processes and colleagues. Those interactions enable individuals to develop the critical understanding of organisational aims, objectives, structures and processes necessary for meaningful participation

and learning. Anything that limits individuals' ability to use information and communicate effectively undermines the interactions, restricts learning, disengages workers and impacts negatively on performance. It is in relation to information processing and communication that basic skills become an important factor in workplace learning and performance.

Figure 4. Dynamics of on-the-job learning



23. The core definition of basic skills is the ability to read, write and speak in English and to use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general. Raising basic skill levels has become a public policy priority over the past decade, due largely to concern that large numbers of adults lack basic skills, limiting their ability to acquire intermediate and higher level skills and resulting in a serious drag on the UK economy. To address this problem a strategy has been

developed to improve adult literacy and numeracy. The strategy aims to motivate adults to achieve basic skills qualifications at National Qualification Framework level 2 and then progress to higher level vocational qualifications. To support this strategy, basic skills standards, curricula and national tests have been developed, along with appropriate funding and quality frameworks for provision.

24. Low-skilled workers are among the groups of adults specifically targeted by the strategy and employer support is recognised as a precondition for raising basic skills levels in the workforce. Yet employers, while happy to endorse the general aims of the strategy, have to date proved reluctant to take up even free basic skills training on any significant scale. The explanation for this must relate in part to the type of training offered. This focuses on specialist, classroom tuition in literacy and numeracy process skills (e.g. form-filling, using punctuation, making calculations) to pass national tests. It allows some sectoral or occupational contextualisation, but relatively little tailoring to specific organisational needs and employers appear to question its value at that level.

25. The strategy's emphasis on individual progression may also be problematic. Necessarily, organisations are primarily concerned with individuals' ability to apply skills in the specific circumstances of their current role. At firm level, the business case for encouraging workers in low-skilled roles to develop skills to progress beyond those roles exists, but is limited. This suggests that it might be more productive, at least in terms of unlocking employer support, to approach workplace basic skills from the perspective of supporting skills *application* to benefit organisational performance, rather than skills *development* for individual progression.

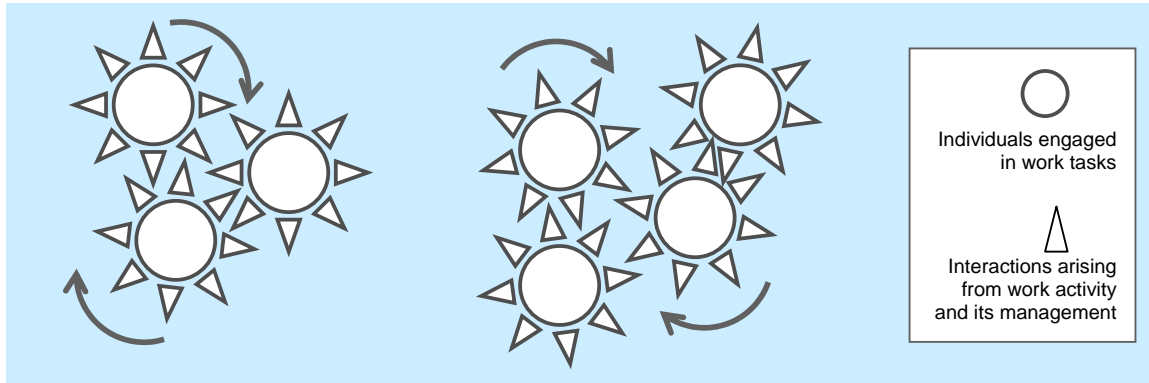
26. In relation to skills application, research has been undertaken to identify the basic skills required for a range of work activity. Much of the research is based on analysing job descriptions, operating procedures and occupational standards to identify the literacy and numeracy 'sub-tasks' specified or implied within them (such as reading a product label, listening to spoken instructions, passing on messages). Typically the research then maps these sub-tasks to national basic skills standards to create a basic skills 'profile' for the job, perhaps with a nominal basic skills 'level'.

27. The evidence that literacy and numeracy sub-tasks occur widely is useful and may encourage employers to consider basic skills when diagnosing performance problems. The difficulty with this approach, though, is that it limits its analysis of work activity to discrete tasks within individual jobs. This fails to take account of the collaborative nature of work activity and obscures the essential context for basic skills at work, resulting in an unduly narrow presentation of basic skills as simple process skills for literacy and numeracy sub-tasks.

28. Work activity, and the application of skills within it, is a collective enterprise. Its outcomes depend on the ability of individual members to relate what they are doing to what others are doing. This process of co-ordination takes place largely through the interactions between members that arise from work activity and its management. According to their quality, these interactions either enable individuals to participate constructively in collective activity, or they disengage individuals and restrict performance (and also workplace learning). Successful interactions are based on

information processing, to understand the organisational context, and communication, in often difficult contexts. The skills that enable individuals to process information and communicate effectively are basic skills. Here, in the interstices between tasks, so to speak, is where the significant demand for basic skills arises, in relation to both organisational performance and individual learning. (See figure 5 below.)

Figure 5. Demand for basic skills generated by interactions arising from collaborative working



29. This approach to basic skills (that is, as the skills that enable the information processing and communication required for participation in the collective management of work activity) makes it clear that all work activity requires the application of basic skills, regardless of whether or not a given task includes literacy or numeracy sub-tasks. It also suggests that the natural place to 'embed' basic skills is in the processes and practices through which organisations seek to support successful interactions, areas such as team working, supervision, management development, communication, conflict management, diversity, safety risk management and customer service. This aligns basic skills learning closely to people and performance management. It also restores to them their broad function of enabling critical thinking.

30. On-the-job learning is one of the few realistic approaches to widening participation in the low-skilled workplace. The challenge of this approach is to ensure learning on-the-job is genuinely developmental. Workplace learning research suggests that participative people management practices create most if not all of the conditions required for developmental on-the-job learning. Participative people management practices aim to ensure constructive individual participation in collective activity. The challenge to employer-organisations, particularly in low-skilled workplaces, is to implement these practices. Successful implementation depends largely on the quality of members' information processing and communication. The ability to process information and communicate is underpinned by basic skills. Basic skills cannot be taken for granted in the low-skilled workplace. This paper suggests that an on-the-job learning system focused on the information processing and communication required for participative people (and performance) management can significantly widen individual participation in developmental learning while directly supporting organisational performance. Such a system will help to create a workplace supportive of learning and skills

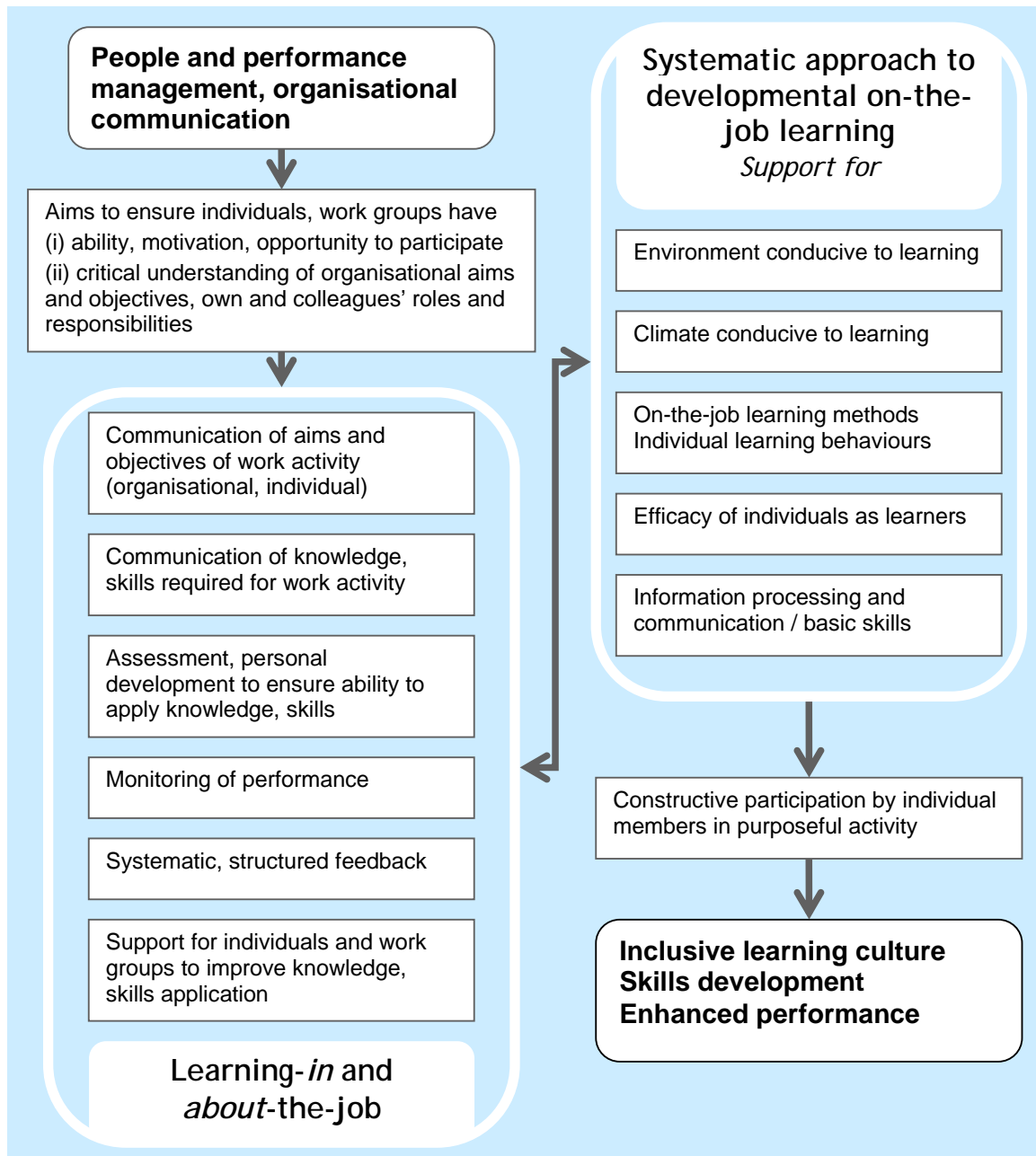
development, supporting employability agendas and meeting the five criteria set for learning in

Learning for a Change in Healthcare:

- benefiting those the service aims to serve
- supporting modernisation reforms
- offering value for money and contributing to improved productivity
- helping healthcare organisations become model employers and local employers of choice
- being consistent with the core aims and values of the NHS.

Figure 6 below summarises the dynamics of the system. The final section of this paper considers practical steps to pilot this approach.

Figure 6. Summary of developmental on-the-job learning



2. Practical steps to test the model

1. In his paper, *Creating learning cultures in the NHS*, Bill Lucas states, '[Widening Participation] needs to continue to champion a rigorous exploration of the science underpinning the impact of delivering different kinds of learning and ensure that there is a debate of sufficient quality and potential that it engages those who lead and manage organisations and teams within the NHS.'⁴

2. The system of workplace learning outlined here offers a research-based model for developmental on-the-job learning that directly addresses a number of key concerns for widening participation. These include basic skills, the pivotal role of line management and the creation of a workplace learning infrastructure. The model also meets two of the principal pragmatic conditions for widening participation, that is

- close alignment to employer-organisation performance objectives, and
- respect for constraints around staff release in the low-skilled workplace.

It does, however, represent a significant departure from most existing practice⁵ and clearly needs to be tested out before it can be recommended to employer-organisations and other stakeholders in the widening participation agenda.

3. Among the questions to answer are:

- What activity does the system call for in practice; in other words, what actually needs to happen for learning to take place?
- Who is best placed to undertake that activity?
- How is the impact of such activity on individuals, work groups and organisations best measured?
- How is the learning arising from the activity best measured for individuals, work groups and organisations?
- How do different circumstances affect the answers to these questions?

4. The *Learning through Work* project is currently attempting to address these issues. Now in its second phase, this project will trial and evaluate a number of facilitated workplace interventions designed to explore how the ideas discussed in this paper play out in practice in the low-skilled workplace. These trials are intended to deliver the following outcomes

- practical methods to support on-the-job learning in low-skilled workplace
- role specification for facilitator of on-the-job learning
- evaluation report, case studies assessing intervention outcomes (individual, organisational)
- assessment of implications for public policy, including funding of workplace learning (with particular reference to basic skills).

WPILSU supported the project's first phase. It has good reason to continue its support.

⁴ Lucas, B (2006) *Creating learning cultures in the NHS Inspiring ordinary people to perform extraordinarily well* Expert paper produced for DH Widening Participation in Learning Strategy Unit www.wideningparticipation.nhs.uk/pages/expertpapers

⁵ Recent practice in the low-skilled workplace relevant to the model described here includes work in Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals described in Novitzky, J., (2007) *Evaluation of the Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals NHS Trust – Oxfordshire County Council Skills*

3. Endnote: The role of union learning representatives

1. The role of trades unions, and in particular union learning representatives (ULRs), has not been discussed in this paper. A recent SKOPE issues paper⁶ considered how far unions can use this agenda to promote workers' interests, aid union renewal and further the development of a 'high skills society' in the UK.

2. The paper noted that although ULRs cover 40% of the workforce, they are present in only 13% of workplaces employing more than ten workers and absent from many sectors where low skills and restrictions on training are particular issues. The paper then went on to state the following.

'The current ideological and political parameters within which skills policy is currently being played out further constrain unions' ability to advance a demand-side agenda. The UK Labour government has ruled out any form of active industrial policy that might allow the state to shape the direction of the economy and its skills trajectory, on the grounds that such investment decisions are best left in the hands of individual firms. Furthermore, commitment to the 'flexible labour market' has meant that, notwithstanding initiatives such as a low level national minimum wage, the government has tended not to view regulation as a means of establishing, what Streeck (2004) calls, the 'beneficial constraints' that are needed to push more firms away from cost-based competition.

'If the government is an unlikely ally, are there ways that unions themselves could try to influence the demand for skills? One approach might be for unions to link their 'learning agenda' to wider initiatives around job design and skill utilisation in the workplace. This might be something that union learning reps could be encouraged to undertake by raising issues with management over the way that jobs could be reconfigured to promote better utilisation of workers' skills and capabilities.

'To date, their role has not been identified in this way, reflected in the lack of courses and guidance on issues of work organisation. Providing ULRs with awareness and training in this area does not mean, however, that management will respond positively. Many employers may not welcome an enlargement of their role to include issues of job design and unless unions are well-organised they are unlikely to be able to make significant progress. Despite these difficulties, it would seem essential that unions attempt to link up learning activities to a wider agenda around workplace and work organisation development.'

3. The system of developmental on-the-job learning proposed in this paper offers an approach that might allow ULRs to engage with workplace development and work organisation issues at a pace and in a manner acceptable to employer-organisations. A system of on-the-job learning based on the principle that management of work activity is in reality a collective responsibility offers a consensual approach towards the democratic objective of widening participation.

Escalator Centre NIACE Leicester; also Arakelian, C., A. Braddell (2005), Bite-size Adventures in the Workplace, *Basic Skills Bulletin* No 37 Cambridge

⁶ Lloyd, C., J. Payne (2006) *British trade unions and the learning and skills agenda: an assessment* SKOPE Issues Paper 12, Cardiff pp3,4

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