

## **DEVELOPING BASIC SKILLS IN THE WORKPLACE**

### **Supporting Paper for the ‘Learning through Work’ project**

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#### **1. Introduction**

This paper discusses a range of issues that need to be considered and explored as the ‘Learning through Work’ project progresses and evolves. It draws on evidence from a wide range of research projects that have sought to investigate the phenomenon of workplace learning, but it does not provide a review of this literature as this has been commissioned elsewhere for the project. The paper is divided into five further sections. It argues that the project’s activities need to stay firmly rooted in the everyday life of the designated work sites.

#### **2. The Role of Context**

Learning in the workplace takes many forms and is part of everyday activity, whether conducted by individuals or groups of colleagues. All workplaces comprise interconnected nests and layers of social relations that, together with external forces (such as government regulation, global markets etc) and internal forces (such as performance targets, resources etc), form a productive system. Hence, workplaces are dynamic environments. The complexity of their contextual make-up means that workplaces create very different types of learning environments, and the nature of those environments is subject to change. The ways in which work is organised within these different environments will reflect the contextual limitations within which managers have to operate. Some environments are particularly fragile, though this does not necessarily have to be a barrier for learning. Generally, however, greater stability tends to provide a more conducive climate for long-term, formalised learning programmes such as apprenticeships. Concern about the viability of a workplace can reduce employee motivation for learning and deter managers from taking risks with, for example, allowing employees to show their potential in a different role and/or to cross boundaries.

In order to develop and expand learning opportunities within the multi-various workplaces and productive systems of the NHS, it will be necessary to ensure that, as far as is possible, the contextual features of each of the project’s sites are identified and monitored over time. A **contextual map** could then be produced for each site. The features of this map might include: the key drivers (e.g. overall aims and goals, targets, timescales); reporting lines; known barriers (e.g. ageing equipment); staffing levels and profiles.

### 3. The Role of Work Organisation

Each workplace will organise the work of employees according to the parameters imposed by the contextual features and the levels of discretion available to managers. The meaning of the term 'workplace' needs to be considered. The term is sometimes used interchangeably with the term 'organisation', or it may be used to denote a 'space' within a building where part of the organisation's overall productive system is put into operation. The overlapping nature of spaces and places for work and the opportunities for spatial (as well as mental) boundary crossing form part of the conditions conspiring to determine the extent to which learning takes place. A second 'map', (the **work organisation map**), identifying the extent to which employees are able to relate to each other within and across occupational and task boundaries could, therefore, be useful, as a further means of creating a contextual and relational picture of the project's sites of work. Such a map would also highlight the extent to which certain individuals or groups were more isolated from others and the reasons for this.

The extent to which employees can exercise discretion and the extent of employee involvement in workplace decision-making, problem-solving, and knowledge management arise out of the ways in which work is organised. The greater the levels of discretion and involvement, the greater the opportunity for new learning, and for refining and sustaining existing skills. High involvement also stimulates greater knowledge sharing and collegial support. These phenomena are, by their nature, difficult to observe and measure, and they have a tacit quality that means individuals may not, necessarily, be aware of them or able to articulate them. This social and behavioural aspect of the work process is, however, crucial to our understanding of the nature of work itself, and to the acquisition and use of skill.

The concept of knowledge management tends to be used in relation to occupational roles further up the hierarchy than those at issue in the project. Yet all jobs have a knowledge base and all employees need access to information at various points in time to work effectively. The German concept of 'work-process knowledge' is useful here as it connects knowledge to actual work functions and forms part of the argument that employees need to understand how their part of the productive system fits in and contributes to the whole. Such knowledge, it is argued, enables employees to better understand the worth of their activity and the collective nature of enterprise. Not all knowledge is, of course, codified, and the tacit nature of much workplace knowledge means that employees with poor basic skills may 'know' things, which, if codified, would be beyond their level of formal educational attainment. A better way to think about tacit knowledge might be to view it as tacit capacity, a more holistic concept that embraces the complex ways in which individuals perform work tasks using a range of mental and physical capacities. A key challenge for the project will be to try and expose examples of where tacit capacity is in advance of individuals' capacity to articulate such knowledge in a codified way. The entry point for this would be through asking employees to talk about their work tasks, from which deductions can be made about the type of knowledge and skill involved.

At the same time, poor basic skills will be preventing some employees from accessing the codified knowledge they need to perform more effectively. Thus we have the potential for a third map (the **knowledge management map**). This map would

identify the sources and types of codified knowledge in the workplace and where it was located (e.g. in artefacts such as manuals and procedures or on computers) and the types of tacit capacity that people use on a regular basis. Importantly, the map could seek to identify examples of codified knowledge that employees routinely ignored through problems with basic skills. The 'relational' connection between the **knowledge** and **work organisation** maps can then be investigated to identify the extent to which: a) individuals rely on each other to overcome basic skill barriers; b) some knowledge is exclusively used by certain individuals/groups; and c) some knowledge is ignored.

#### **4. Basic Skills and Work Tasks**

The concept of basic skills perhaps presents the biggest challenge for the project. The tacit-codified dimension is relevant here. It could be argued that the ability to read and write, and to perform certain mathematical and IT functions requires the assimilation of codified knowledge. On the other hand, the ability to greet patients, follow verbal instructions, and contribute ideas in a team meeting rely heavily on a tacit understanding of inter-personal relations and the accepted norms of social behaviour, and a willingness (disposition) to act in a collegial manner. Again, the context of the workplace, the way work is organised, and the nature of the work tasks will all affect the way in which basic skills are perceived and utilised.

It will be necessary, therefore, to build a picture of the 'lived reality' of basic skills across the project's work sites. In particular, the project could identify the **combinations of skills** across a range of work groups and from this further identify the most common combinations and the most common skills. This in turn would provide the basis of a **task-based curriculum** and, hence, root the teaching and learning strategies within the daily work routines. Furthermore, such an approach would be more likely to appeal to employers (as interruptions to work activity could be minimised) and individuals (as any hint of 'basic skills lessons' would be avoided).

The concept of a task-based curriculum could also be used to encourage managers in the different sites to re-configure the organisation of work to allow individuals and small teams to carry out tasks in ways that allowed them to exert higher levels of discretion. This might enable employees to identify ways in which they might need to improve their skill levels and so provide the motivation for direct input from a 'tutor'/learning facilitator (this might be a more experienced colleague or supervisor). The possibility of identifying 'tutors' from within the workforce could be powerful as such individuals would communicate in the shared workplace language and be more able to support (and jointly develop) a task-based curriculum.

The role of the 'tutor'/learning facilitator needs to be very clearly articulated. The individuals concerned will need to be able to 'teach' when required in order to plug a skills gap at any particular moment. At the same time, they need to be able to melt into the background when work pressures overtake. The concept of 'guided' learning is certainly appropriate here, but the participants will expect concrete help and advice.

## **5. The Role of Support**

Managers and supervisors at each work site will need to understand the important role they will play in creating the necessary supportive conditions for the project's activities. This will need all-round collaborative effort as project staff will also need to understand the demands and pressures imposed on managers by the workplace productive system. Furthermore, project staff will also need to adapt their model and particular strategies in order to mould the project more closely to the dynamics of the different workplaces.

## **6. Conclusion**

The focus of the project should be on the use of skills as part of everyday workplace activity. In that sense, part of the outcome will be a commentary on the way basic skills are perceived and utilised in the workplace by and between individuals, and on the role of basic skills in the productive system of healthcare. By closely relating the improvement of basic skills to everyday activity, the project will stay focused on the embedded nature of workplace skills and avoid the trap of an 'education-led' approach whereby basic skills are reduced to their 'subject' origins.