

The Role of Learning and Organisational Culture in Basic Skills Learning in the Armed Services



Context is Everything

The culture and organisational context of the Armed Forces strongly fashion the design, management, configuration and delivery of workforce development. The Forces' business case for investing in Basic Skills (BS) learning must fully support the 'Services' way of doing things' if it is to gain senior management buy-in. Unless the BS provision is sensitive to the operational setting, then line managers are reluctant to release their personnel during work time to access provision. At the same time learners are less likely to respond enthusiastically to provision that they perceive is not directly relevant to their work.

Organisational Perspectives on Workplace Basic Skills

Three overarching organisational perspectives on workplace BS learning have been identified in the research literature (Payne, 2002). Each perspective can help to inform the Armed Services' overall approach to BS.

- *The workplace as a site for BS learning* emphasises the continuity between workplace BS and other forms of adult learning. Within this approach, workplace BS courses are often seen as an access point for individuals who might not otherwise engage with BS learning, and as a springboard to other forms of education and training. This perspective is relevant to personnel who may have failed in school and are offered a second chance at learning in the Armed Services. It also shows how BS learning can be a platform for the continued engagement of personnel with lifelong learning.
- *Situated literacies* highlight that skills are both developed and used in specific social contexts, with important implications for workplace learning. This underlines the importance of ensuring that BS learning is tailored to the contexts and purposes of Service personnel. BS tutors must have sufficient understanding of their respective Service environments to make learning relevant and meaningful



for learners. It also implies a limit to the extent to which BS learning in the Armed Services can be modelled on other workplace BS courses.

- *Functional analysis* identifies the specific demands for literacy and numeracy skills in the workplace and emphasises programmes designed to meet these needs. A functional perspective can help to support the transfer of BS learning from the classroom to day-to-day tasks. It is also an essential part of making the 'business case' for BS learning to key stakeholders.

Diverse Approaches to Basic Skills Within the Services

A wide range of organisational approaches to BS is evident, both within and between the Services. This includes differences in the targeting and timing of provision, and the extent to which BS improvements are tied to career progression. Models of provision include tutor-led BS, discrete BS provision in education centres, integrated Key Skills (KS) provision in apprenticeship programmes, e-learning and self-directed learning undertaken whilst on operations. It is also important to consider the impact of the learning and organisational cultures of key partner organisations, such as local FE colleges and Learndirect centres, through which a significant proportion of BS and KS provision is delivered.

A Whole Organisation Approach to Basic Skills

Workplace BS learning is most successful when it is supported by a 'whole organisation approach' to BS, of which ownership of BS issues within the organisation is a crucial aspect of this. Levels of support from commanding officers and managers will

strongly influence the uptake of learning opportunities among Service personnel, and the extent to which positive cultures develop around BS learning. Getting line managers and the chain of command more on side to improve soldiers' literacy, language and numeracy skills, is the most significant improvement area identified in the Army Basic Skills Survey (2006). Frequent postings (every 18–36 months) for all Service personnel can create challenges, especially in ensuring consistent senior and middle management support for BS provision (BSA, 2007).

The role of ownership in determining the impact of BS learning is recognised within the Armed Services' BS policies. Aligning BS standards to career progression is part of a drive to transfer responsibility for achieving MoD BS improvement targets to the chain of command. This represents an important shift in organisational culture in relation to BS education. This approach is supported by research into workplace learning, which suggests that tying job retention or progression to BS requirements, for example, through licence to practice requirements, can have positive effects on the development of a learning culture.

Elective or Compulsory Learning?

Increasing commanding officers' and managers' engagement with BS issues may affect the extent to which BS can be characterised as an 'elective learning' opportunity within the Armed Services. Different degrees of voluntariness are currently evident in approaches to the Services' legacy populations¹ compared to new recruits. The latter are much more likely to be required to undertake BS provision. Army research shows fairly strong

1. Those personnel already serving when the Armed Forces BS Policy implementation was imposed (1 April 2006)

support for a mandatory approach for those with identified needs, with six in ten line managers agreeing that those with poor BS should be ordered to go on training.

Peer Support

Informal peer support, alongside formal BS mentoring schemes, is a crucial part of developing a positive learning culture around BS in which difficulties can be acknowledged and addressed. Among the most positive findings from the Army Basic Skills Survey (2006) are those that relate to learners' willingness to encourage colleagues to get involved in learning. Three quarters of learners agreed that it would be useful for some of their friends and colleagues in the Army to seek BS support. Three in five reported that their own learning experience prompted them to encourage others to get help with their own literacy, language and numeracy skills.

Connecting Learning with Work

Focusing on qualifications as a key outcome of learning can foster a narrow

understanding of workplace BS learning, as consisting only of formal discrete episodes of training. A formalistic and qualifications-orientated approach also risks detaching BS learning from job performance. Future research might consider how roles and working practices can be reconfigured to expand opportunities for informal BS learning within the Armed Services, whilst fitting around training and management regimes and the demands of Service life.

The Learning Development Officer (LDO) role has emerged within the Army to support the improvement of workplace learning that is organised/delivered on and around the job by line managers, trainers and mentors. LDOs (all specialist education officers) focus on improving the support, teaching or mentoring skills of the directing staff. Until now, centralised, formal training away from the workplace has been the norm within the Armed Services, but this is expensive and time consuming. It is also anticipated that the emerging approach will encourage embedded learning and on-job learning.





Further Research Questions

- How, and to what effect, do learning and organisational cultures fashion BS provision and arrangements for accessing that provision?
- How can opportunities for informal BS learning be recognised, expanded and dovetailed with formal training programmes, in and outside the workplace, in order to lead to recognised qualifications?

Further information can be found at:

www.niace.org.uk and **www.nrdc.org.uk**

References

- Basic Skills Agency (2007). *Army Basic Skills Provision: Whole Organisation Approach: Lessons Learnt*. London: BSA.
- Payne, J. (2002). *Basic Skills in the Workplace: A Research Review*. London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.