

EAAL SCOTLAND IMPACT FORUM

The impact of learning on work: a stimulus paper

The attached paper was prepared by Lorna Unwin and Alan Felstead as evidence to the Government Office for Science Foresight report on Future Skills and Lifelong Learning. The paper has been made available to L&W for use at its impact forums as a stimulus paper in thinking about the impact of learning on work. It is intended that following discussions at each of the four impact forums, Lorna Unwin will further develop the content of this paper to produce an evidence review of the impact of learning on work.

The ten key messages from this report – and some possible considerations for discussion – are as follows. You should not feel limited by these questions, however they may act as a useful stimulus for discussion:

1. The evidence illustrates different paradigms of learning. Firstly, ‘learning as acquisition’, where skills are developed through formal activities, supported by teachers, against a prescribed curriculum and with measurable outcomes. Secondly, ‘learning by participation’, a process whereby individuals improve skills and performance through practice. What counts as learning, who takes part and what the impact is, will depend upon which paradigm we use.
2. Quantitative measurement of ‘learning as acquisition’ shows that nationally the incidence of learning peaked in 2001, after which it has fallen steadily then stabilised in recent years. At the same time reported training times have also shortened, resulting in a significant fall in overall training volumes. *Forum members may wish to consider what the impact of these changes might be, and whether there is evidence of this.*
3. Real levels of training expenditure by employers have also decreased. *Is this a problem – and do you have any evidence to support this? Would better evidence on the impact of learning address this issue?*
4. Despite the emphasis placed on attending training courses and the acquisition of qualifications, both are relatively low-rated by employees in terms of their helpfulness in improving work performance. Activities more closely associated with the workplace – such as doing the job, being shown things, engaging in self/collective-reflection etc – are regarded as being more helpful in improving performance, reflecting the ‘learning as participation’ paradigm. *Are you aware of additional evidence that supports or contradicts this? What are the implications of this for evidencing the impact of learning?*
5. At a time when formal workplace training has been declining, this evidence suggests that the importance of learning on-the-job is rising? *Are you aware of additional evidence that supports or contradicts this?*
6. Participation in all forms of workplace learning, in both paradigms, is skewed towards those at the top of the occupational hierarchy. *Are you aware of any additional evidence that highlights the impact of this, or of the impact in instances where this is not the case?*

7. Much of the qualitative evidence shows that learning occurs naturally in all workplaces as part of everyday activity in line with the learning as participation approach. However, not all learning is recognised and valued, and some workplaces are more capable of capitalising on their learning potential than others. *Are you aware of additional evidence on the impact of 'learning as participation'? How might we better develop the evidence base for this?*
8. Workplace learning takes many forms stretching across a 'formal-informal' continuum. In the main, it is a collective process involving employees working together to solve problems, to find better ways of producing goods and services, and to create more efficient practices. This latter dimension also includes employees subverting procedures to 'get round' barriers to efficiency and/or to make their jobs more amenable. *Are you aware of additional evidence for this? How might we better demonstrate this impact?*
9. International research evidence suggests that the key inter-related determinants in the variability of workplace learning environments are context (including employer behaviour and employment relations) and individual behaviour. *Is there evidence from your nation to support this?*
10. External recognition and accreditation of workplace learning is problematic due to its largely collective and dynamic nature. What counts as 'learning' differs from one context to another. *What are the implications for this in evidencing the impact of learning?*

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