

VOCATIONAL WORKPLACE LEARNING: WHO IS IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT?

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This article is based on research undertaken for the Commonwealth of Learning on the combination of open and distance learning and vocational workplace-based learning in Aotearoa New Zealand (Alkema & Neal, 2020). Drawing on this research, my article describes workplace learning, considers three models of delivery, and assesses the value of these approaches to learners/trainees/apprentices, employers, and tertiary education providers.

The findings and opinions expressed in this article are offered to inform views of on-job learning that the New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology (NZIST) might consider as it broadens its scope of work to incorporate more vocational workplace-based learning. As the system proposed under the Reform of Vocational Education (Ministry of Education, n.d.) grows to incorporate its new acronyms – Workforce Development Councils (WDCs), Te Taumata Aronui, Regional Skills Leadership Groups (RSLGs) and Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVES) – it is imperative, not only that there is understanding of how this system functions at the strategic level, but also how it operates at the tactical, operational level. This means having a common understanding of vocational workplace learning, the models of operation that suit industry and employers, and approaches to learning (theoretical and practical) that suit trainees and apprentices.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research, conducted in the first half of 2019, started with a rapid literature review followed by three explanatory case studies (Yin, 2014): the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (OPNZ); Careerforce; and the Building and Construction Industry Training Organisation (BCITO). Given the Commonwealth of Learning's knowledge needs, a purposive sampling approach (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Bamberger, Rugh, & Mabry, 2006) was used in order to obtain three different approaches to workplace learning. Seventeen interviews were conducted, which included programme development managers, resource developers, workplace advisors, employers and learners/apprentices. In relation to the 10-Level New Zealand Qualifications Framework, the programmes of study investigated included a Level 5 qualification in adult tertiary teaching; a Level 4 qualification in carpentry; and Level 2 and 3 qualifications in health and wellbeing.

WHAT IS WORKPLACE LEARNING?

Formal workplace learning for qualifications is learning employees undertake on the job while working. It is formal and deliberate (Billett, 2004); "moment-by-moment learning ... occurring through everyday engagement at work is shaped by the activities individuals engage in, the direct guidance they access and the indirect contributions provided by the physical and social environment of the workplace" (Billett, 2001, p. 210).

In this context, theoretical aspects are generally covered off through learning materials from education providers, then transferred and integrated into practice through activities at work. Workplace learning is experiential and participatory (Billett, 2004; Vaughan, O'Neil, & Cameron, 2011). This process happens through what Ako Aotearoa

(2014) call a three-way partnership; what Alkema and McDonald (2014) refer to as collaboration and a structured partnership between the learner, the education provider and the workplace; and what the Workplace-based Learning Working Group (2020) call a tripartite approach. "Work-based learning describes learning that takes place at work, through work, for the purpose of work. It comprises varying proportions of on and off-job learning developed via a tripartite employer-learner-provider partnership" (Workplace-based Learning Working Group, 2020, p. 5).

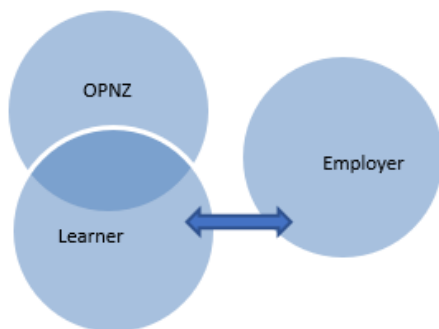
Each of the players has a role in the system. Alkema and McDonald (2014) point out that learners bring their potential to the job – their aspirations, motivations, persistence and sense of self-efficacy, qualities that grow and develop as they acquire new knowledge and skills. Education providers develop and deliver learning materials and assessment opportunities along with organising, planning and supporting learners and employers. Workplaces afford opportunities (Billett, 2015) for learning and practice that enable learners to become and be, for example, care-givers, builders, teachers (Chan, 2011). When everything comes together, the learning, transfer and practice align with experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997).

Notable in these various descriptions of workplace-based learning is the sense of equity in the system. However, it is probably fair to say that this has not always been the case with provider-based education. Here, in a provider-led model, education organisations have put themselves in the driving seat by determining what is taught and assessed, along with where, when and how this is done. While course material has been developed in consultation with the industry, including employers, the latter have been left pretty much at the receiving end of delivery in what has historically been a low-touch and, sometimes, low-engagement model. But in the new vocational education environment there is acknowledgement of the need to change this situation:

We must move the employer from being seen as simply a 'player' in work-based learning to that of an equal partner with the learner at the heart of work-based learning. With a business to run, the employer also wears the hats of teacher, mentor, counsellor and assessor, often with little or no formal skills in these areas, and little support. Success requires we understand the needs of and provide tangible support for the employer (technical; educational; financial) from day 1 of the new NZIST (Workplace-based Learning Working Group, 2020, p. 7).

Putting others in the driver's seat requires direct interface and engagement with employers. Models for these approaches exist in Aotearoa New Zealand – Transitional Industry Training Organisations (TITOs), previously Industry Training Organisations (ITOs), have engaged directly with employers around programme content and delivery, and actively worked in workplaces to support employers and trainees/apprentices. These models are included in the descriptions below.

Figure 1: Provider-led learning



Source: Alkema and Neal, 2020, p. 37.

MODELS OF DELIVERY

Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs) utilise a range of approaches to workplace learning, including fully-integrated learning, practicums, work-integrated learning and simulated learning (Alkema & McDonald, 2014).

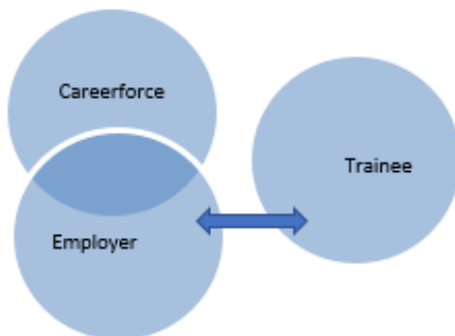
In 2019 OPNZ engaged with over 26,000 learners. It works from the premise that its teaching and learning approach provides flexible learning opportunities and access to learning that people might not otherwise have. Seventy-three percent of its learners are in employment (OPNZ, n.d.). In the OPNZ case study

of a Level 5 qualification in adult teaching, the ITP uses a distance learning approach whereby learners use materials and assessments for qualifications.

The OPNZ approach is a form of fully integrated, workplace-based learning. This form of provision is significant as it offers access to those who may not be able to get to a physical campus, allows people to undertake study in their own time, to study while they work, and to study what is relevant for their current or future work. The learner at the centre of the polytechnic case study found considerable value in the opportunity provided through distance learning and the subsequent outcomes for her: "Study is relevant and timely. I can prepare myself ahead of time for possible other jobs – preparing myself for the future. There are always new courses. The cool thing is that [while] my manager doesn't support PD on the [work] website as there is no money for it, I can do what I want to do. (Learner)" (Alkema & Neal, 2020, p. 36).

The provider-led approach is also of value to employers who gain from having more knowledgeable and skilled employees whose practice is theory-informed. The qualifications offered are sector-informed and the provider is in the driver's seat in terms of determining the programme that is delivered and the assessment timing and mechanisms. Learners choose to enrol and have a range of motivations for this, but have little say over the direction of learning. The extent to which employers are involved varies, but in this case study the employer was only required to sign off on observations of teaching practice and had no connection with OPNZ.

Figure 2: Employer-led learning



Source: Alkema and Neal, 2020, p. 27.

The employer-led model is also a fully integrated approach. It is used by Careerforce, which arranges training for around 19,000 trainees in the health and wellbeing sector (Careerforce, 2019). The organisation takes both a top-down and bottom-up approach to programme development. Sector engagement happens at the industry level and day-to-day engagement happens with employers who are directly supported by Careerforce front-line staff who are workplace advisors.

With Level 2 and 3 qualifications there is no interaction between Careerforce staff and trainees. Instead, Careerforce provides learning and assessment resources and supports employers to run what is essentially an employer-led model

of learning and development. Here, employers are responsible for the training infrastructure and the mechanisms that support and enable trainees to learn and complete qualifications. Learning resources are provided online, with larger healthcare providers being in a position to contextualise these to the needs of their workplaces and ways of working. "We look to make the qualification align to work. [Level 2] is aligned to our induction programme – put it into our own language, documents, policies and procedures" (Employer) (Alkema & Neal, 2020, p. 31).

Employers are also responsible for deciding the model of support that helps trainees through the learning and the qualification. Alkema and Neal (2020) show two ways this is done – through learning mentors and nurse educators. Both employers in this case study – a community-based home care provider and an aged-care facility – provide trainees time to meet in groups, usually during paid work time.

The learning mentor in the community-based sector and the nurse-educator in the aged care facility both operate what can be deemed communities of practice. Here they run sessions with trainee practitioners – community support workers and care-givers – and help them make connections between the learning materials and their work. "There is real value in the face-to-face sessions with trainees every two weeks. ... I try to keep everyone on the

same page so we can have discussions, but they have different learning needs ... the advantages of the approach are that you can check in with people and they are kept up to pace ... (Nurse educator)" (Alkema & Neal, 2020, p. 30).

This socio-constructivist approach enables trainees to make connections between theory and practice. It also supports them to develop as reflective practitioners as they think about what they are doing with their clients on a daily basis. This and other research shows that operating with a community of practice model and using reflective practice are a real strength in the work of health practitioners (Eyre, 2011; Murray, 2015).

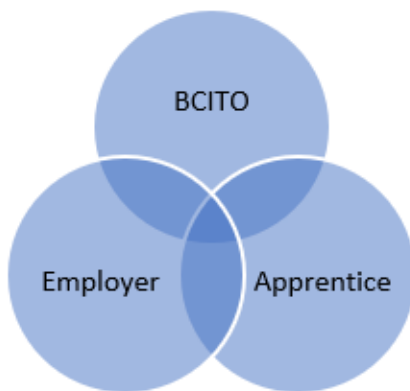
"[I'm] Constantly checking in with trainees and getting examples of what they are doing. It helps them not to get complacent and keeps them fresh. It's a good way of having conversations and analysing what could be done better" (Learning Mentor) (Alkema & Neal, 2020, p. 35).

"Matt and Wendy ... support the idea that ODL is not an individual journey, rather it is a collective and constructivist journey that enables staff to complete qualifications and become practitioners who are able to support clients to develop to their full potential" (Alkema & Neal, 2020, p. 36).

While the learning mentor and the nurse educator are dedicated support roles, the everyday responsibility for supporting trainees sits with their supervisors, who guide them through the practical learning at work – the application of the theory to practice. These supervisors determine when trainees are ready for their practical assessments and they, or another expert observer, verify the trainees' practice while an in-house assessor marks the theoretical aspects of the qualifications. Combined, this real-world assessment undertaken by employers means that they are in the driver's seat when it comes to determining decisions about the capability of practitioners.

The value for employers being in the driver's seat in the healthcare sector derives from the provision of theory from Careerforce; the underpinning this then provides for the practice of their staff; the ability they have to contextualise it for their workplace; and the ownership they have of the assessment processes. Having a national organisation provide the qualifications also means consistency of training across the country. For the trainees, value derives from being credentialled for what they are doing at work and while working. However, this model is reliant on workplaces having a training infrastructure in place that supports trainees through their qualifications. "The overall benefit is that the approach creates consistency in and across workplaces in New Zealand. We get industry feedback so can adapt. We can make things happen really quickly. It gives mobility [for trainees] between workplaces – and the same level of service to all (Workplace Advisor)" (Alkema & Neal, 2020, p. 33).

Figure 3: A partnership approach



Source: Alkema and Neal, 2020, p. 27.

The third model, based on partnership, is also a fully integrated one. The BCITO arranges training for around 12,000 apprentices across 15 building sectors and does this by engaging with over 6000 employers (BCITO, 2019). The BCITO uses sector engagement and also takes a research-informed approach to its work. In the carpentry sector, research has been used to inform the delivery and assessment model (Vaughan, Gardiner, & Eyre, 2012). While the usual process of industry setting standards and programme design take place, the coal-face delivery sees the driving being shared.

While the theoretical aspects are covered off in the learning materials, it is not compulsory for apprentices to use them and there is no bookwork or written assessment for the Level 4 carpentry qualification.

Nevertheless, there is strong sense of the need to engage with these materials, and this usually happens in apprentices' own time (Alkema & McDonald, 2016; Alkema & Neal, 2020).

Showing knowledge of theory is covered off through professional conversations that apprentices have with their training advisors during site visits. Theoretical requirements are also covered off in conversations that training advisors have with employers around what apprentices need to know for their current and future work. Here, BCITO training advisors need to walk the fine line between provider provision, in relation to the need for theory to underpin practice, and what employers and apprentices see as being needed for the real world. "Employers think that it is about getting practice on the job, and in terms of specific theories, 'haven't used that s*** in years.' In relation to problem-solving and calculations around, for example, areas, volumes, quantities, the newly qualified builder talked about, 'There are apps [on my phone] that can do that for you.'" (Alkema & Neal, 2020, p. 17).

Each training advisor works with round 90 apprentices whom they visit, on site, every three months. It is a high-touch model that allows them to guide and support the apprentice's learning and directly engage with employers about progress and the 'where to next' for the apprentice's learning. These visits with apprentices are professional conversations (formative or summative) that tease out what apprentices know and have done. As the high-energy comment below shows, this process allows information to pour out of apprentices and puts them in the driver's seat in terms of determining what it is they are reporting on.

In response to a general question about what he had done since the last visit, building apprentice T responded that he had "done heaps," before going into further detail. "Done heap of straps – but the plywood came braced. Did the ecoply, taped joints, nails every 150. Used an old coil gun. I was on the nails ... then I moved on to cladding. Did it with colorside [coloured steel cladding]. Had to get the vermin strips level. The first time I've done palisading [weatherboard cladding]. Measured off the line [level line set by employer], two nails on each cavity baton as it was a high wind zone. Then flashings, clad up to the window. I helped chuck the window in – I just held them up. ... Cut the packers for the windows. Cut the flashings" (Alkema & McDonald, 2016, p. 12).

The conversation is supported by evidence gathered from a walk around the site, photos of work that has been done, the apprentice's diary entries and a conversation with the employer: Here the employer not only confirms what has been done and the standard to which it has been done, but also sets the direction for learning on the basis of the work that is coming on stream.

This model, with its shared driving approach, is of considerable value to all those involved. It is built off interaction and engagement that acts as partnership. BCITO training advisors have direct and frequent interaction with employers to ascertain industry demands and employers' needs. Employers are exposed to conversations around learning and development, and set the direction for learning based on their requirements. For apprentices, being central to the partnership means that their direction for learning is set on a needs basis and in a timely way.

DISCUSSION

In light of the structures imposed as a result of the government's Reform of Vocational Education or RoVE (Ministry of Education, n.d.), there is an opportunity for discussion, a rethink and reworking of how workplace-based learning operates. RoVE envisages "[a] new future for work skills training in New Zealand" (Hipkins, 2019). The new system is seeking to impose a sense of order on the things that were seen to be problematic in the 'old' system – a skills shortage, a dual vocational education system, challenges faced by the Institute of Technology and Polytechnics, and the lack of input into off-job learning by industry (Ministry of Education, n.d.). However, what a difference a year makes, as Covid-19 brings new challenges into the teaching and employment environments. As a consequence, enrolments are increasing in provider-based settings (Gerritsen, 2020) and the hoped-for increase in the numbers of apprentices in work through the Apprenticeship Boost and extension to Mana in Mahi schemes is eventuating (Hipkins, Sepuloni, & Jackson, 2020).

A restructure of the vocational education system through the establishment of NZIST, along with the introduction of Te Taumata Aronui, WDCs, RSLGs and CoVEs, does not ensure that delivery and operating models for workplace-based training will change. The latter groups have roles that commit them to ensure that the reforms reflect the government's commitment to Māori–Crown partnerships (Te Taumata Aronui); to give industry a stronger leadership role (WDCs); to provide advice about regional skills needs (RSLGs); and to inform good practice (CoVEs).

While these goals are all important at the system level, it is at the ground level – the interface between the learner/trainee/apprentice, the employer and NZIST – that the real work happens. The three models described in this article all have a place in supporting workforce development. Here it is not just a question of structure and roles, it is also about the practice within the models and who is allowed to own and drive what is done.

The importance of workplace-based learning is not in doubt. New Zealand's Productivity Commission (2019) acknowledges the need for a flexible training system that can accommodate both provider-led and workplace-led approaches, and has identified a need to widen access to work-based education and training. So, if learners/trainees/apprentices are getting the knowledge, skills and qualifications they need; if industry and employers see these as the 'right' skills; and if Aotearoa New Zealand has an efficient and productive workforce, does it matter who is in the driver's seat? If we argue according to this premise, then it doesn't matter, as this approach takes the view that education is a product – skills delivered for individuals, employers and industry.

But education is a process, not merely a product, and it is this process that needs to provide the opportunity for everyone to have a turn at driving. There will always be a place for education providers to bring their knowledge and expertise to the teaching and learning process. But with workplace-based, on-job learning, education providers should recognise the expertise of employers, the role they have in teaching and learning, and the affordances they offer for practice, reflection and assessment.

This may be a big ask for some employers. They can be the first to admit that education is not their prime purpose, that they are there to make things or deliver services, but they will also say that they are willing to partner in the learning process and take responsibility for it. They also want qualifications to be integral to the work they do, reflect the work they do. They want to take a role in determining the readiness of trainees and apprentices for assessment and the awarding of qualifications and subsequent entry into a vocation or profession. "It wasn't just about our staff receiving a certificate and hanging it on the wall; it was about real time learning that could be applied right away in the workplace. This was an exciting development for us. It opened up several opportunities for our staff and great outcomes for the business" (Alkema & McDonald, 2016, p. 8).

Vocational workplace-based learning is not straightforward. Trainees and apprentices do not come through an education provider's gate on a daily basis. They are dispersed across thousands of workplaces and are reliant on the capability and capacity of thousands of employers to support them and provide them with opportunities to learn and practise. The traditional model of open and distance learning in provider-based settings sees providers in the driver's seat. This is not a negative factor, and has the advantage of reach and opportunity for learners who wish to undertake this form of learning and have the capability and capacity to do so.

However, the Careerforce and BCITO models show that workplace-based learning provides the scope for trainees/apprentices and employers to play a direct and authentic role when they are given ownership of and responsibility for what is learnt and assessed. Direction-setting by employers means that they get the skills they need when they need them, and that they are developed in the way that suits workplaces.

The NZIST Establishment Board's working group recognises the need for employers to be partners in the process. This implies a sense of equality and working together, but the question remains – how willing are education providers to allow employers to steer, while they sit in the passenger seat? Over the next few years as WDCs,

in addition to their other roles, “set standards, develop qualifications and help shape the curriculum” (Tertiary Education Commission, 2020), NZIST will need to negotiate flexible and empowering delivery models in which the driving responsibilities can be shared.

Anne Alkema is an independent researcher who has been researching vocational education and workplace-based learning for over 10 years. In this article, she examines the practices of education providers, industry training and workplaces.

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