

Plugging a gap? Soft skills courses and learning for work

Elisabet Weedon and Lyn Tett

**Centre for Research in Education, Inclusion and Diversity (CREID),
University of Edinburgh
University of Huddersfield**



Issues identified in policy:

- EU Lifelong learning policy stresses workplace learning: ‘every member states should: promote effective incentives for those within and outside employment’ (Council of the European Union, 2011).
- In Scotland ‘employer investment in skills is [regarded as] complementary to investments in plant, machinery and ICT’ (Scottish Government, 2010a, p. 43).
- However, a Scottish survey (Scottish Government, 2010b) found that whilst nearly two thirds (61%) of employers had funded training during 2009, employees in SMEs and those that were ‘low skilled’ were least likely to receive training whilst those already highly skilled were most likely to be offered training.

Issues identified by the literature:

- Uneven access to training - the so-called 'training apartheid' phenomenon in which those with lower-level academic qualifications are less likely to receive training than are their better-qualified more senior colleagues (Ashton, 2004; Westwood, 2004; Eurostat, 2013).
- People bring a set of beliefs and dispositions to their working lives that impact on the workplace culture so learning is both a component and an outcome of individuals' engagement in work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Billett, 2006).
- Different types of workplace cultures: 'expansive-restrictive' culture (Fuller & Unwin 2004) and 'reactive-expansive' training environments (Hefler & Markowitsch 2012)

Skills for Scotland: upskilling the Scottish workforce

- ESF funded, 3 year project managed by Adam Smith College, Scotland
- 13 project partners including colleges, universities, unions and voluntary organisations
- The project aimed to provide tailor-made courses for people in employment especially geared towards upskilling the workforce
- Our main role was to evaluate the impact of some of these courses – working with 2 colleges and 1 trade union (focus here on 1 of the colleges)

Why Soft skills

- A Scottish survey (Scottish Government, 2010b) found that around half of the employers (48%) stated that they would have provided more training but lack of funds (62%) and problems with releasing staff from work (51%) impacted on training. Most (85%) of the training received was job specific or related to health and safety/first aid (72%) that are statutory requirements.
- When employers were asked to identify any skills gaps, they prioritized 'soft skills' such as teamwork, problem solving skills, leadership and customer service skills (Scottish Government, 2010b, p. 30).

The soft skills courses

Two types of courses based on SQA accredited modules aimed at:

- new managers/team leaders; 1 day/fortnight for 10 weeks
- ‘operational’ level employees aimed at those; 1 day/fortnight for 8 weeks

Course content:

- Time management, assertiveness, effective communication in the workplace
- Reflection on own learning an integral part of the course

Strong emphasis on learner engagement through individual, group and whole class activities

Assessment available but not compulsory – linked to workplace and completed after the end of the course

Methods

- 1 day observation of each of the courses (used to contact learners and ask them to participate)
- Semi-structured interviews (31 in total; 22 follow-up): one immediately after the course and one 3-6 months later
- Asked the learners if we could contact their employer/line manager (13 in total, some managed more than 1 learner)

Challenges:

- Persuading learners to take part, especially on the operational level courses
- Finding suitable times and venues for interviews
- Staying in touch for 2nd interview

Managers of low skilled staff were particularly difficult to contact

Company: Charity set up to provide care in the community

Learners:

- Deirdre, late 30s, no qualifications, FT carer
- Alison, 50s, 1 lower secondary qual., FT carer
- Jim, 55, basic City & Guilds (building), worked in engineering, made redundant, PT carer

Encouraged by line managers to attend course to prepare for SVQ 3 (compulsory for care workers):

The way we got explained it was something to help you with the SVQ that we're going to be going on, because we were like 'how do you do word things', that's the bit that myself and Alison find hard, know when you're putting things on paper, you've got to find what are they looking for and how do you word it. (Deirdre)

Benefits and challenges

Well, at first I thought to myself 'is this really for us, are we benefiting from that?' but now that it's finished, it's about time management and tasks and how you can do things in a timescale ... managing your job basically, isn't it? (Alison)

Going on those two or three days, what [the tutor] took us through ... I wouldn't be able to speak to you now if it wasn't for things like that ... (Jim)

But

What are we meant to be writing? ... when I went home ... writing on the reflective log how I felt and that but I said, some of the bits 'what am I meant to be writing?' (Deirdre)

Support by line manager:

I was getting myself a wee bit worked up and at one point didn't know what I was doing ... Ailsa (line manager) was really good ... at helping us think of ideas [and prompted us] 'well why don't you do that, this is what you should do''. She's been really good ... without her I wouldn't have had a clue ... (Deirdre)

Oh, yeah, when we have our team meetings as I said earlier, everything's brought up and if we have any other business, you could bring up anything and they'll put it forward to the managers if you want extra training (Jim)

The company was a construction company which provided a full range of building services. Learners:

Ricky, late 50s, left school no qualifications, apprenticeship

Brian, late 40s left school with lower secondary (4), apprenticeship

Mike, 40, left school with lower secondary (3), apprenticeship

Informed by line manager that they were to attend the course with no explanation:

Got a text message [saying] 'Mike you 'll be going to the [college], 9 o'clock Thursday morning for 4 weeks'. That was it, go there, do it ... I don't know how he choose me (Mike)

The first day of the course we couldn't really see how it was going to help us ... but second week, third week got a lot out of it (Brian)

Benefits and challenges

I write down the drawing the way they (architect, consultant) want it done ... whereas before I would just keep it in my head, had to tell people what to do and then [they would say] 'what are you wanting me to do now', whereas when I am writing it down they can see what I am on about (Ricky)

It was alright a wee bit of benefit, it made you understand how to things different, and how you do your day to day running of some stuff ... Time will tell (Mike)

What I really didn't like and I still struggle with ... where you've got the reflective learning ... you had to write down what you had learnt ... I still can't get my head round this reflective ... it's like you' asking me to evaluate myself and I find that hard (Brian)

Training, you don't get any training now, not with the recession ... General training, can't really get trained in anything ... you want to be an apprentice, you train to be a welder, do your gas, get your tickets, but you go back through that every ... 3 years but they don't really have to send you back if they don't want you to weld ... (Mike)

About value of the course

I could see where it was coming from [the course] but as I say ... being realistic we wouldn't be able to do that within work. Maybe able to do that in an office or something, on site you wouldn't be able to do that ... don't get me wrong ... but most of the guys we've got are scatterbrains ... [in] some of the other [construction companies] it would work (Mike)

Conclusion

- The individual's attitude to learning matters but even reluctant learners can be encouraged to engage
- The content and pace is important: those with high qualifications wanted faster pace and coped with reflection; those with low qualifications wanted more time and struggled with reflection
- BUT learners with low qualifications get access to less training than more highly qualified (in this case 4 days vs 5 days)
- Courses of this nature can have a beneficial impact but this is affected by workplace culture
- The courses were dependent on one-off ESF funding. The intention was to develop them but to charge for them and possibly make them shorter 'bite-size'. This is likely to maintain and possibly increase the 'training apartheid'

For further detail see:

Weedon, E. & Tett, L. (2013)

Plugging a gap? Soft skills courses and learning for work, *International journal of lifelong education*, available on:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02601370.2013.773572>

And

<http://edin.ac/17EkdRE>