THE DIALECTIC OF INFORMAL LEARNING:

A study of the discursive effects on the workplace learning of trainers situated within post-industrial corporate agendas.

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CERTIFICATE

I certify that this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being submitted as part of candidature for any other degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me and that any help that I have received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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PREFACE

The notion of informal learning has captured a great deal of attention in recent years. There is an increasing volume of published works representing, amongst others, postmodern, critical, interpretive, and positivist perspectives. Informal learning is such a powerful and elusive phenomenon, however, that no one perspective has the capacity to capture its range of meanings. It has to be considered allusively. To adopt a single, exclusive approach renders any findings vulnerable to attack from other approaches. This is symptomatic of a more general crisis of knowledge associated with the "postmodern condition".

Within the field of practice of human resource development (HRD), debates over informal learning have tended to focus on *how it can be enhanced*, or *what can be done* to enable individuals to learn more "efficiently and effectively" in their day-to-day work. The debates have not substantially challenged existing definitions, conceptions and uses of the term. There has been little critique about the uses of the term informal learning, or of its construction within the master discourse of economic rationalism. Two of the principal challenges of this text are to promote debate and to animate critique of the convenient exploitation of the rhetoric of informal learning by "new" workplace practices.

Informal learning does happen in everyday contexts as part of day-to-day life, but it is also a key element of a discourse which has this "everyday" process as its "subject". As such informal learning is constructed in certain ways, for example, as a component of "experiential learning" and as an aspect of performing one's work tasks "competently". This highlights problematic terrain for the study. Usher points out that this discursive construction (of a subject) can be problematic in several ways:

> I don't think it is coincidental or 'natural' that we focus on certain things rather than others. Once we start analysing something, once we start making something the object of our investigations, we do so within and through a discourse. It gives us a vocabulary, a set of concepts and pre-understandings, a motivating focus and direction of our investigations — above all a disciplined and systematic way of 'talking about'. (1993: 169)

By "talking about" informal learning, I am discursively constructing what is sayable about it and, by implication, leaving something unsaid. The unsaid relates to what falls outside of the discourses that enable analysis of informal learning and to the influence of informal learning in discourses themselves.

In Australia and throughout the OECD nations, HRD literature has contributed to a highly instrumental notion of "informal learning" being used by Commonwealth and State authorities reforming national training and accreditation processes. To simplify, this "national training agenda" seeks to make the country more "competitive" through having more highly-skilled, more highly-trained workers who will serve the needs of industry. Informal learning thus becomes part of the discourse of "competence". It is precisely the aim of developing a "competent" workforce which can compete internationally against emerging "tiger economies" that underlies the powerful drive to incorporate informal learning into an economistic discourse in which the purpose of "skills acquisition" (including skills learned informally) is to enhance competitiveness.

The connection between economics and training has been referred to variously by Marginson (1993), Wexler (1993), Stevenson (1993; 1994), Barnett (1994) and Burbules (1995). They note that the education of the "whole person", a long cherished ideal of a liberal education, is being rapidly lost through the alignment of education with economics. It is being lost, in part, because education is becoming increasingly absorbed into an economic-training agenda. Critical and postmodern theorisations about this alignment have for some time been concerned that education increasingly plays a secondary role to market economics.

With education in a secondary position to economics at a national policy level, workplace training too is constructed as secondary to industrial relations. This is particularly so within production-oriented industries. This thesis does not attempt to argue why this may or may not be economically justified. Rather, a counter argument emerges through the stories of industry trainers themselves. A close examination of the industrial contexts of the stories, and the emergence of clearer understandings of the parameters of informal learning reveal the banality of much of the contemporary training reform rhetoric.

There are, however, problems in developing richer notions of informal learning. Many more questions are raised than are answered. And the stories demonstrate a certain "irreducibility" inherent in informal learning. As an educational concept, informal learning appears less suitable for competency-based assessment than many in

industry, and sections of education communities, may have hoped. Indeed, the notion of informal learning is problematised, thus expanding debate about its uses in the competency movement.

Also raised is the issue of how learning tends to be shaped by economic imperatives. Opposition to dominant (economically based) expectations at particular sites has resulted in fascinating "internal dialogues", reflected in the trainers' stories. A significant part of this project is to interpret these reflexive moments so as to highlight the lived experience of industry trainers in their daily practices. Clearly, informal learning involves engagement among persons and between persons. But, as Burbules (1995: 13) warns us, "for this engagement to avoid dependency, there must also be a critical distance". It is precisely the lack of "critical distance" which remains a concern in relation to the new bridges being formed between education and learning-at-work, bridges which, to a significant degree, centre on recognising the informal learning of individuals.

The first chapter of this thesis provides details of why these stories are gathered. Chapters Two, Three and Four review the literature on informal learning focussing on the underlying philosophies of informal learning, work as a learning environment, and postmodern doubts and truths about industry training. Chapter Five describes the research methodology and Chapter Six commences the dialogue with industry trainers from several major corporations about their own informal learning. The power and influence of the corporations (and their industry contexts) upon informal learning clearly emerges through these "grounded" interviews. In Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine the focus moves to the informal learning of trainers within one corporation and one industry context: construction. The site for study is that of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games.

Chapter Ten discusses the findings, suggesting more radical ways of viewing informal learning and of work as a learning environment. Contemporary views which seek ever increasingly to link "the person" to work-productivity fail miserably to play with the tropes of irony, tragedy, and parody — elements of education which Burbules (1995: 13) convincingly argues are so important to learning. This in turn leads to the failure to hear the voices of difference and other influences that are not always directly observable at any given site. And yet they are always present.

It is my hope that enhanced understandings of informal learning may lead in the longer term towards paths of qualitatively better work lives and, in the shorter term, analyses which help us make sense of the turbulent postmodern and post-industrial

conditions. Such hopes directly relate to how industry trainers learn from dealing with their experiences and dilemmas at work and the implications of this for their formal education.

When workplace "bottom-lines" are at stake (as they frequently are), learning about "other voices", about different perspectives and indeed, opposition, can become difficult. This difficulty can lead to the uncritical adoption of certain stances which should be resisted or at least interrogated. It can also lead to critical stances which allow alternative types of oppression. The development of new views about informal learning has implications for the links between formal education and work-based learning, the reflexive learning of individuals (and their adaptations to work purposes), and training practices within industry. I think there are ethical directions and purposes in this, but they will not be to everyone's wishes.

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ABSTRACT

The study critically examines definitions of "informal learning", focussing on the term's application in workplace training contexts. Drawing on Foucault, Heidegger and Habermas, it is argued that we cannot understand ourselves (and thus our informal learning) without challenging the assumptions of modernity and coming to terms with what Lyotard has termed "the postmodern condition".

Industry trainers are at the forefront of implementing "designer" corporate cultures which, in the rhetoric of "work-based learning", make enterprises more innovative and competitive. This study challenges that rhetoric, showing that the implicit philosophy of contemporary workplace learning and training is framed by an economistic "human capital theory". The "stories" of industry trainers from several multinational corporations challenge assumptions about what is learnt through competency-based training and about corporate uses of informal learning. It is argued that *being* at work entails far more than simply performing the tasks one is required to *do*, which, in turn, effects the links between informal learning and formal education.

The final chapters are directed towards expanding and realigning interpretations of "informal learning" away from the narrow and instrumental purposes for which the term has been appropriated. Equity, respect for the dignity of others, and a philosophy of ethics have a place in "workplace learning". Informal learning is shaped by our deepest ethical and moral responses. It does not follow that measurable tasks, what one can be observed doing at work, represent one's learning.