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Re-presenting organisational practices as learning practices

Introduction
The growth of knowledge work and the construction of the knowledge worker (Drucker 1993) have activated widespread interest in learning in organisations. In this contemporary context, investigations and characterisations of learning (at) work and work as learning, formal versus informal learning and so on, have drawn learning out of its educational, training or institutionally-oriented 'home' to situate it within business practices. New manifestations of learning can be linked to organisational practices such as, for example, coaching and mentoring, and perhaps less obviously to practices of performance management, teamwork, career development, and the like. These organisational practices are creating new meanings and understandings for learning at work and are therefore producing different learning experiences, and workers, from those of the past. We are interested in how and if these organisational practices promote learning while they simultaneously enact organisational functions.

We use the term *Integrated Development Practices (IDPs)* to identify these practices, defining them as organisational practices that are independent of formal training programs and not defined explicitly in terms of training and education; are managed or implemented by people whose primary job function is not training or learning; and attempt to invoke an organisational influence or change. One area of our conceptual work is the refinement and re-definition of what we mean by the term IDPs, and more specifically why we have brought together notions of 'integrated', 'development' and 'practices'. Thus, by 'integrated' we mean practices that are identifiable yet typically considered as part of the everyday work of a contemporary organisation. Further, we explore some ways of understanding the integration of work and learning. Here we note the work of writers who have provided valuable insights into everyday work practices and learning (for example Billett, 2001, 2004; Hager, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991). We use 'development' in an 'organisational development' or 'organisational learning' sense, hence our specific focus on organisational practices and their relationship to particular work(er) practices. We are interested in how organisational practices are taken up, interpreted and so on, and how this, in turn, produces organisational change. Finally, by 'practices' we are referring to 'shared bundles of doings and sayings' at work, and which constitute work, drawing on the work of practice theorists (eg. Kemmis 2000; Reeves & Forde, 2004; Schatzki, 2001).

Our starting point in this paper is that organisational practices are often deployed in the pursuit of particular organisational objectives such as performance improvement, change management and organisational effectiveness. However, we also suggest that these practices are simultaneously examples of learning in practice. We therefore begin with an understanding of these practices as strong organisational practices and weak learning practices. By this we mean they are understood either explicitly (named and documented), or implicitly (emerging from employees themselves) as organisationally focused. When learning is named or surfaced, it may be acknowledged as 'value-added'. In the research on which this paper is based, we are exploring a range of these practices across different kinds of organisations. We are developing an account of these practices from the perspective of organisational change and / or effectiveness, while at the same time identifying what and how learning occurs for employees within the organisation through these particular work practices.

In this paper we begin by framing our research in terms of the integral (though sometimes unrecognised) relationship between work and learning, and we outline our initial thinking in regard to IDPs. Specifically, we set out to re-present some organisational practices as (potential) learning practices. Following this, and drawing from empirical data, we provide examples of practices in organisations that fit our criteria. The paper suggests some ways in which organisationally focused practices might be re-presented as learning practices. It concludes with some implications for organisational and worker identities.

Work and learning
Employees when asked to nominate where they learn how to do their job overwhelmingly point to their workplace as a major site of learning (Skule & Reichborn 2002). Researchers, policymakers and practitioners have taken up this idea to understand how and to what extent workplaces are sites for learning, and how work and learning can be better integrated to benefit both individuals and organisations (Ellström 2001). For the most part, these endeavours have either focused on examining structured learning at work leading to a qualification or tailored to the specific skill needs of the organisation (Fuller & Unwin 2003), or they have focused on understanding the significance and facilitation of learning that can occur during the everyday activities of work (Billett 2002; Colley, Hodkinson & Malcom 2003).

This contemporary focus on the integration of work and learning in organisations has resulted in a re-examination of learning theories in terms of their usefulness in the context of learning at work (Hendry 1996).

Contemporary views on learning in relation to work explore practices that are outside formally prescribed learning situations, have no instructional metaphors and do not employ traditional pedagogical activities (Bereiter 1994, Hager 2003, Saugstad 2005). In other words, the practices are not explicitly named or described using teaching and learning discourses. Nor do the identities of those involved they easily slot into positions of teacher or trainer and/or learner (Boud & Middleton, 2003; Boud & Solomon, 2003, Scheeres, 2003).

We agree with those writers who maintain that learning is embedded in practices beyond those traditionally understood as educational or training practices. From this position we are particularly interested in work practices that are specifically named, and often supplemented by explicit company documentation, that are part of the profile of the organisationintegral to the way it 'works'that are not usually spoken about as learning practices. These kinds of organisational practices, or IDPs, although not new, have recently come to the fore as important organisational discourses and practices. As such, they are creating new meanings and understandings of what constitutes work and who people are at work. What employees learn and how they learn at work involve the production of different discourses and practices from those of the past. One way of characterising IDPs is as hybrid or transitional, bridging the binary between formal (course-based) and informal or incidental learning. We argue that these contemporary practices can be understood as explicitly performing organisational functions, while simultaneously they almost always involve learning of some kind. Indeed, it is usually the function other than learning that is foregrounded in their representation. These functions include such things as contributing to organisational effectiveness, developing new organisational relationships and creating new accountabilities and work roles. The commonality in almost all of these practices is that they are introduced as strategies to effect organisational development.

In summary, then, IDPs are familiar practices in discourses of organisational management, but less understood in terms of learning. While some helpful insights about work and learning are available (eg. Lave &Wenger 1991; Billett 2004, Colley, Hodkinson & Malcom 2003), our interest is specifically focused on particular practices. There has been little detailed examination of how these kinds of practices construct and produce learning, and we suggest that researching these practices in terms of learning can contribute to understanding how particular work practices involve learning by workers. In our empirical work so far, we find that not only are organisations invoking these practices, but also that staff are creating their own IDPs that operate in and on the organisation. The identification of these employee-generated practices is not only extending the ways in which we are thinking about IDPs, but it is leading us to consider ways in which IDPs are being 'created' by employees that are furthering the goals of the organisation, and doing worker development and identity-work at the same time.

Research methodology
At the time of writing we have undertaken empirical work in two organisations: one in the community sector (community college), the other in the public sector (local council). Research methods include workplace observations and semi-structured, taped interviews with up to twenty employees in each organisation, and analysis of organisational documents from each site.

Our aim is to provide analyses of the lived experiences of people involved in IDPs by developing and investigating detailed accounts of specific practices and their embodied and organisational effects. Hence, interviews constitute our primary data source and the questions are designed to elicit narrative accounts of what people understand as their jobs; how they 'do' their jobs and how they know how and what to do. Further, there is a focus on the organisation's processes and experiences of development and change. Interesting discourses are emerging that link employees' practices and organisational practices in various ways. Using thematic analysis of the interview data has produced some examples of common ways of approaching and 'dealing with' organisational practices, as well as a foregrounding of tensions between organisational deployment of practices and their uptake by interviewees at different levels across the organisations. Employees' narrative (and often complex or 'messy') accounts of their work are being examined against the more procedural and linear descriptions constructed in organisational documents. We are finding that employees' accounts of their practiceswhat they are; how they know how to do their work, including new work; how they engage with particular organisational IDPs, and so on, raise ways of working and learning that require engagement with understandings of practice from perspectives of both organisations and employees. Some of the findings are outlined and discussed below.

Presenting and re-presenting IDPs
We now turn to describing some examples of IDPs from the two research sites. In the discussion we present IDPs that are familiar organisational practices: performance appraisal and induction / job orientation, and we begin to explore possible re-presentations of them in relation to practices that might promote significant learning practices: mentoring and making up jobs.

The discussion follows under two headings:
    From performance appraisal to mentoring
    From induction and job orientation to 'making up' one's job

From performance appraisal to mentoring

Performance appraisal is a familiar term for a set of practices common in contemporary organisations. While performance appraisals have their limitations (Gray, 2002), and they are deployed in various ways across different workplaces (Nankervis & Compton, 2006), they remain a prevalent organisational practice, particularly in organisations committed to the idea of quality management and the associated ideas of continuous organisational improvement (Rasch, 2004; Sinclair & Zairi, 2000). The texts to be consulted and filled out, and the related activities to be performed that together constitute performance appraisal, are usually prescriptive and linear with specific formalities, recording and signature requirements. Performance appraisal processes usually appear explicitly in organisations' accounts of themselves, and they are promoted as important development practices for the organisation and the individual.

However, some employees and managers see performance appraisal as insignificant in the broader context of their everyday work, while others regard these practices as particular surveillance or accountability practices. Whether perceptions and beliefs about performance appraisal emerge because they are not seen to be 'real work', or because there is a desire to subvert processes of managerial surveillance, or for some other reason, our data demonstrates that these processes are often constructed by employees as weak organisational practices in relation to both the organisation and the employee. These findings could be further explored in relation to the literature concerning performance appraisals which questions their efficiency and capacity to actually deliver on their promises (Gray, 2002; Nankervis & Compton, 2006; Rasch, 2004; Sinclair & Zairi, 2000).

For example, one interviewee, Jane, comments that she doesn't 'think much of [performance appraisals] for all sorts of reasonsdon't think they give much direction about how you're going'. When asked why she thought performance appraisals were an organisational practice in her workplace she answered 'I really don't knowwell it's not to do with anything ... there's no direction from the team leader'. In the same organisation, Mandy comments ' yeah performance appraisals we do them once a yearthey tend to bethey're getting similar each year and its easy just to repeat each onefeedback, we do get feedback there to an extent'. Neither of these workers presents performance appraisal as important in terms of development, although the statement regarding feedback introduces a qualified 'to an extent' awareness of the developmental purpose of these practices.

On the other hand, Colin supposes that appraisal practices are there to 'to keep you on track and to make sure that you're doing what you're meant to and visa versa to look at training you would need or like'. Frank similarly refers to the accountability purposes and even though he doesn't see performance appraisal as too onerous, he outlines the 'official' organisational processes that emphasise formality and structure. The inclusion of 'benchmark' and 'judge' recognise that accountability is inherent in the appraisal practices:

> it doesn't happen very frequently I think we're talking officially supposed to happen … we're talking about structured appraisals were two parties come together with a pre-planned set of questions where they discuss their views on these various criteria and make a some external benchmark judge against make some plan about moving forward

A different perspective comes from John, a manager who describes practices around performance appraisal as

> they say 'have you done your performance appraisal in June' I say 'I do it everyday' I call for people I call people in to just do it daily just a cup of coffee with them still got to do the formal thing at the end but I'm sure all the staff realise by now that there's going to be no surprises I must admit I do - we do joke about it I get them to fill in the forms and say 'no-one is to give themselves a five this year or you'll get my job' and they'll give themselves fours and I don't even care what they give themselves …. if they've given themselves a two I say 'why would you do that' then there's a problem in their mind they see that they're not competent in communication or something and I'll say 'well why do you think that because I thought you were I thought you were competent so give yourself a three for that….'.

Notable in this response is John uses a discourse of organisational accountability characterised by the numerical values ascribed to items of performance a kind of performativity, coupled with a mentoring discourse where talk about employees' work practices is integral to everyday work and is characterised by informality and supportive suggestions and advice.

John's response can be understood as an approach to performance appraisal that fits it in as part of creating and maintaining a collegial work environment. Even though there are competing discourses in his comments, John demonstrates that his practices are more to do with peoples' positive sense of themselves their identities than any kind of accounting. Similarly, another manager Ronald, describes himself as coaching other employees by sharing his expertise: 'I have got a lot of experience and a lot of background - I do a bit of coaching. So people come to me and I share my experiences and background'. Ronald's response was not related to performance appraisal *per se,* it was included in an outline of his job and roles within the organisation.

What we are interested in exploring further, is how performance appraisal practices may, in some cases,

operate as something closer to mentoring, and thus how might learning occur and even be promoted. In the data, we are drawing out how particular practices integrated into the 'goings on' of an organisation exhibit or integrate learning practices. The interviewees' comments above demonstrate that while the performance appraisals were carried out in various ways, (possibly satisfying, rehetorically at least, organisational objectives in the process), the uptake of performance appraisal as lived experiences of the workers produced mentoring processes rather than a focus on measurement and surveillance. Thus, a further and related area we want to pursue, is to consider links between organisational practices such as performance appraisal presented as an ongoing, integrated set of practices, and how these practices might evolve into coaching and mentoring in practice.

From induction and job orientation to 'making up' one's job
Employees find out what to do at work what their job entails, what their duties and responsibilities are, and so on, in a number of ways. Job interviews and job descriptions may constitute the first source of information. Job descriptions, for example, provide potential incumbents with an outline of the position, and are generally seen by both management and employees as central to the recruitment process (Gan & Kliener, 2005:48). Once employment is offered, then some kind of induction session is provided. This can range from a structured induction program to explanations by managers and other designated staff, to observations of work and workers, or to a combination of any of the above. At one of our research sites, a local council, the outline for the one-day induction for new staff covers the following:

Agenda
  Introduction and Welcome by Human Resources
  Address by General Manager
  Rehabilitation Overview
  Staff Benefits, Human Resources
  Code of Conduct and Ethics
  Policies & Procedures, Human Resources
  Superannuation
  Library Tour
  Bus Tour of municipality

Our observation of one of these inductions was an experience filled with powerpoint slides, presenter talk and an abundance of complicated information. The organisational discourses that made up the induction focused on orienting employees to the broad workings of the workplace.

A similar array of policies and procedures was evident in the community college research site although there were no organised induction sessions here. Rather, induction and job orientation often consisted of learning through experiencing the job from day one as the following interviewees outline:
  First day I was told that I was going to be trained and then that person was going away for 3 monthsso I realised that I was going to jump into the deep end and do it myself

And:
  I don't think that happened at allbut there was no sit down and this is what we doI sat with [name] *for three days maybeand then I went and sat at my own desk and started taking calls*

These experiences of job orientation processes, or intended processes, do not seem to help employees much in inducting them into their work. We are discovering practices that meet our criteria of IDPs yet they are ones that are invented by employees themselves as they 'read' the organisation and identify priorities that they believe fit the directions in which it is moving. From this they use the opportunities they have to construct work practices to their own liking. We are exploring the practice of 'making up one's job', in which individuals creatively interpret, and in some cases modify their own job description and have this validated by their managers.

For example, one employee who is a manager in the local council told us that her main job was policy development and analysis and that everyone was now part of a work team that met every two weeks. She decided to plan and implement team-building exercises. She now sees this as an integral part of her work and would like this kind of activity to increase and continue.

One college employee was literally was handed a job description with four broad headings:
  VET and compliance, business development, professional development and management of tutorsI only got this recentlyfrom managementI get those four headingsand he says can you just flesh this out for me

This worker appears to have developed her job over time by 'fleshing out' and adding activities, as required. But this was not the only way workers at the college made up their jobs. Another worker made up a job that was more meaningful for her. This worker saw her job as a career and broadened her original job to include greater variety, scope and responsibility. Employed originally as a team leader in the administrative support staff, this worker currently reports her job as:

Customer Service Manager, which I kind of made up myself because there wasn't that job beforeas Customer Team LeaderI saw a need for increasing the customer service and also looked at my progression in the companyso I put together a package for [the Principal] *to look at a role that managed the whole of Customer Service*

She had come to the college with a history working in a large corporation and it is likely that this history contributed to her understanding (and possibilities) of her work. Furthermore, the making up of the Customer Service Manager job also impacted on the jobs of others. In making up her job she also re-made the jobs of workers who reported to her directly. For example, the site coordinator role was re-made from being a job responsible for opening and closing venues, to a customer service role, representing the college and servicing students and tutors. This practice created new development spaces that other workers could chose to unproblematically engage in (or not)and even these re-made jobs were open for further re-making by the incumbents.

Thus, although our initial interest was in investigating induction and job orientation practices, we have developed a focus on making up jobs. We now want to investigate further the sub-field of working out what to do at work and who to be as a worker. Our path into the employee-generated IDP of making up one's job is leading us to analyse organisationally created practices and employee-produced ones associated with learning (at) work.

Concluding points

The practices we are uncovering in this project range from the more well-known and named practices to ones that are extending our original views of IDPs to include employee-generated practices. These latter practices construct organisational life at least as much as managerially-organised practices. However, as they are not inscribed in organisational documentation and may not be generated as part of policy, they remain unacknowledged and are at times difficult to articulate. Indeed our research is beginning to foreground the complexities in understanding particular practices in terms of worker and organisational learning.

As we identify, name and map IDPs across the research sites, we are grappling firstly with how and why some practices in organisational life can be acknowledged as development practices. As the examples above demonstrate, this entails more than an investigation of organisationally-sanctioned practices, or ones cited in management/organisational publications. Secondly, we are looking at what characterises organisational practices as developmental in terms of the organisation and in terms of particular employees. An IDP such as performance appraisal may not be recognised as developmental by employees, so there may be a mismatch between the intention of the organisation and the experiences of employees. This kind of contradiction or tension (as well as other examples of complementarities) will be examined in terms of interrelationships and intersections of activitiesactivity systems in the organisation. Thirdly, building on these analyses we will take up notions of learning in practice, investigating how IDPs are, and who sees IDPs as learning practices. This involves exploration of the use of learning discourses and how these discourses are related to broad development discourses. Already emerging from our research concern with learning, are issues about the importance (or not) of a 'learning intent' as integral to an IDP. In other words, how IDPs produce learning is a central problematic and focus of our work.

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