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Skills Training: Who Benefits?

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> The insistent questions that adult educators need to … ask … are 'Who benefits?' and 'In whose interests' rather than beginning with the assumption that all adult learning is equally valid, equally important, and that the only issues for adult educators are how programmes can be 'delivered' in the most efficient way.
>
> (Payne, 1995:272)

Introduction

After a century of second class status, the idea of 'learning for work' has suddenly become the darling of public policy. In the past decade, governments across the industrialised world have made sweeping promises about the contribution of vocational education and skills training to prosperity in the global economy of the 21st century. The sub-text of these policies has been the familiar claims of (neo-) human capital theories and 'trickle-down' economics that economic 'growth' and prosperity for business would translate into well-being for individuals and communities. For the most part, meaningful public debate about these promises and assumptions has been successfully stifled by a steady flow of compelling rhetoric about competitiveness, productivity, and economic survival.

This paper explores some common political dynamics and conflicting interests underlying the rise of neo-liberal skills training policies in Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Canada and Great Britain. In these and other countries influenced by the OECD, policy makers have forged an apparent consensus across social groups – business, labour, individuals - with diverse and sometimes conflicting interests in the structure and purposes of skills training. Yet the resulting reforms have been designed to ensure that control over and benefits from skill training are redirected away from individuals and unions and into the hands of private capital. In this framework, skills development is being transformed from the chance for individuals to gain bargaining power in the labour market, into an opportunity for employers to gain workers whose knowledge and skill is already tightly harnessed to the interests of business. In examining these issues, our analysis will focus not so much on the familiar issues of restructuring in the 'training industry' as on the changing social organisation of the concept of skill itself.

This analysis draws on our own ongoing research in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand with policy makers, trainers, trade unionists, and other activists involved in vocational education and skills training sectors. We see these efforts as contributing to a larger and much needed critical dialogue in search of an alternative vision of 'learning for work' that will value community prosperity, democratic citizenship, and social justice over the imperatives of value-added production. The questions we want to address are time-honoured ones among adult educators on the left. But their relevance, indeed urgency, in the arena of skills training is only beginning to dawn.

The training gospel: from faith to doubt

Canadian journalist and social commentator Jamie Swift (1995) coined the term 'training gospel' to name the spread of a neo-liberal orthodoxy about skills development throughout the advanced capitalist countries over the last twenty-five years. What was initially envisaged by policy-makers as a short-term response to youth unemployment, and then adult unemployment associated with the business cycle, has gradually come to be accepted as a central and defining component of macro economic policy. Skills development is on offer in a myriad of forms: vocational education in schools, post-compulsory technical qualifications, on- and off-the-job training programs for employed workers, labour market adjustment programs for laid-off workers, workfare/learnfare or other so-called employment assistance or 'work-discipline' programs for the unemployed (Halsey, Lauder, Brown and Stuart-Wells, 1997; Marshall, 1997; Dunk, McBride, and Nelsen, 1996; Marginson, 1993). Such policies have combined to effect a new consensus about labour supply solutions to economic planning, and about how labour should be organised, disciplined and made more flexible to serve the emerging global economy. This consensus has been crafted by the OECD (1994) as well as by international agencies such as the World Bank (1995, 1991). The components of this approach have been given different emphases within different national contexts. But together they represent a remarkably consistent genre of policy which has captured the imagination of academics, policy makers, the media, and the public at large (e.g., The Economist, 1997; Dwyer, 1997; Reich, 1992).

The general argument advanced by these training advocates stems from their respective analyses of the restructuring that has taken place in the world economy over the last quarter century. In brief, they focus on two related drivers of change. First is the spread of new electronic technologies, leading to new forms of work organisation associated with post-fordism and new managerial philosophies associated with 'lean production' and 'high performance' workplaces. These changes are said to mean that more and more workers need to become 'multi-skilled,' and thus 'flexible' (see Story, 1994; Mathews, 1994). The second and related major theme in these analyses is the growing internationalisation of world production, investment and trade. Local economies are said to be increasingly dependent upon international investments and international markets, so that nation-states must train and equip their workforces to international standards (see Ashton and Green, 1996; Brown and Lauder, 1992). National competitive advantage in the global economy means competing with newly industrialising countries with lower wage structures and costs of doing business. Thus, for advanced industrial economies, the competitive strategy of choice is to invest in high levels of skill formation to produce high value-added commodities for the global market place. The argument is often encapsulated in the formula: high skill = high value added = economic growth = high wages and living standards. Increasingly, this path has been seen as "almost certainly the only viable long term strategy for a highly developed economy" (New and Myers, quoted in Keep, 1993: 108).

This powerful, if rudimentary, equation of training with competitive survival has been an extremely effective tool in mobilising widespread political support for training as a public policy priority. Testimonies abound in the policy literature of most OECD countries, as in the following example from Aoteoroa/New Zealand. In 1990, the New Zealand government set up the Education and Training Support Agency (ETSA), now known as Skill New Zealand, to promote training in an economy where 80% of businesses have nine or fewer employees (Skill New Zealand, 1999). The General Manager of that agency stresses that even small firms now compete in a global marketplace and must "identify exactly where their competitive advantage lies. In every case, an important part of the answer has turned out to be the skills of the people who work for them … their 'human or intellectual capital'." In other words "the link between investment in skills development and competitive advantage has never been stronger" (Skill New Zealand, 1999: 1). Thus, as industrialised nations of both north and south approach the 21st century it is considered axiomatic that training should not only be a fundamental part of national economic planning, but that its continued expansion and development will determine national as well as individual fortunes within the new global economy.

On the other hand, all this economic orthodoxy is not without its detractors. Critics argue that its central equation remains primarily a theoretical assertion and lacks both adequate historical and empirical evidence. There are good reasons to doubt that such a strong connection can be made, or that it will have the desired effects on economic growth, unemployment, labour markets or living standards (Ashton and Green, 1996; Booth and Snower, 1996; Klein, 1996; Marginson, 1997). And while policy rhetoric flourishes, training practice remains uneven, if not contradictory. In real life, employers have been reluctant in their support for emerging training policies (Allen Consulting Group, 1994; Field, 1991), and have continued to demand ever greater flexibilities in the system of provision (e.g., Balzary, 1998; Business Council of Australia, 1992, 1990). Furthermore, they have not been making unequivocal demands for workers with higher levels of technical know-how. This is particularly true in large, low-skilled segments of the service sector which are creating the largest numbers of jobs, but where much work is casualised and qualifications traditionally less regulated (Cully, 1999; Lipsig-Mummé, 1997; Young and Spours, 1990). Thus the largest proportion of publicly funded training remains focused on relatively basic workplace qualifications (Robinson, 1999; Swift and Peerla, 1996).

Research also shows that many employers are placing their priority – for current and future employees - not on technical skills, but on 'soft-skill' options such as communications skills, (Smith and Hayton, 1999). Training programs for youth focus heavily on basic workplace discipline, i.e. punctuality, attendance, and reliability along with so-called social and life skills (ETSA, 1997; Ainley and Corbett, 1994). This is in addition to the growing use of 'trainee' programs including work-for-the-dole, workfare/learnfare, or 'community wage' schemes as a substitute for more substantive social policies to meet subsistence needs (James, 1997b; Shragge, 1997; McDonald, 1993/94). On balance, it is not at all clear how this picture of actual training activity

squares with the public policy rhetoric about high skills, high wages, and collective prosperity.

Still more significantly for our purposes, the neo-liberal training discourse depends for its success on creating the appearance of consensus where, in real life, there has been a history of conflicting interests. Systems of vocational education and training are represented in policy documents and in the media as serving the common interests of employers and working people. Meanwhile, these 'constituencies' have historically opposed and contradictory interests, about which unions have played a central role. This history has been a critical factor in organization of training arrangements in the past (Ewer, 1998; Wrigley 1986; Johnson, 1979), particularly apprenticeships which we discuss below. But the days of such explicit political 'settlements' in training appear to be over. Trend setters like the UK Commission on Social Justice now write: "In place of the old conflict between better protection for working people and lower profits for employers, we need new social standards designed to raise the contribution which workers can make to the productivity of their organizations" (1996:184). Remarkably, this formulation simply reinvents 'productivity of … organizations' as a common good rather than contested terrain. Likewise, Skill New Zealand boasts that "people are now demanding … as their right of employment … the opportunity to gain new skills and qualifications." This 'demand' is being met by providing an "individualised structured training plan aligned with the company's skill needs" (1999: 14) Not a word of this glossy text hints at the possibility of differing, conflicting or competing interests. Similar developments could be cited across the OECD sphere of influence. (e.g., Chapman, 1994).

Significantly, labour unions and labour parties across the industrialised world have been drawn into the neo-liberal vision. Not surprisingly, unions have hoped to benefit from the high skills/high wages scenario. But their consent has been won in the context of massive economic and industrial restructuring (Ewer, 1998; Ackers, Smith and Smith, 1996; Hyman, 1991), which threaten the organisational and financial base of unionism internationally. In this same climate, Labor/Labour governments in Australia and New Zealand, have had leading roles in the construction of ambitious frameworks of labour market reform based in part on skills training and recognition. (Ewer, *et al*, 1991; ACTU, 1992; ACTU-TDC, 1987; Kelsey, 1996; NZCTU, 1992). Originally, labour endorsement of neo-liberal solutions was based on promises of concrete benefits to members, such as skill-based wage rises and career paths. But with the triumph of more conservative governments, even unions have retreated to more tentative claims. Thus, the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions describes its 'simple objective' as "the achievement of a high-skill, high-wage economy in order to achieve a fair, just society whose citizens enjoy a high quality of life" (NZCTU, 1997: 5).

So, while the current consensus is built around the promise that high levels of 'skill development' among workers will fuel productivity, competitiveness and prosperity, it nevertheless remains remarkably unclear how this connection is meant to work in practice. These are the questions to which we turn in the remainder of the paper. Our approach will focus on one of the most familiar phrases and fundamental elements of the training

discourse inspired by the OECD: the imperative to make training more 'responsive' to the needs of industry. Exploring the practice of 'responsiveness' leads us to confront some very fundamental questions. How is the concept of 'skill' being used in this discourse, and by whom? What is it being made to mean? Which notions of 'skill' are seen to count as 'responsive' to industry? Which ones are not, and why? Who gets to decide? And whose interests are reflected in these decisions? Though much remains to be explored on all these issues, we have identified some useful starting points for investigation.

The Social Organisation of Responsiveness

In the training literature of the last few years in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand debates over 'responsiveness' of the training system have focused heavily on policies promoting marketisation and privatisation. In particular, the impact of these policies on national systems of public colleges of technical and further education has generated sustained debate. (see Anderson, 1997; Tobias, 1997; Fooks, *et al*, 1997). Proponents of marketisation argue that public training institutions are rigid, inflexible, inefficient, and unresponsive. The neo-liberal solution is to replace the public system by a 'training industry' consisting of multiple providers in the public, private and community sectors, with a focus on employers rather than individuals as the principle client of the system. The rationale for training activity shifts from the provision of a public service, to the development of 'training products and services' in an 'open market' (see Robinson and Kenyon, 1998).

Critics of this solution argue that markets have already proven to be an 'unresponsive' mechanism for delivery of 'goods' on which the welfare of the community/society depends (e.g., HMO s and the health care system in the United States). In the case of training, it is already clear that, left to their own decision making, employers do not train or do not invest in training for other than short term returns (Commission for Social Justice, 1996; Booth and Snower, 1996; Marginson, 1995). It has also been demonstrated that market policies undermine social equity goals (Hughes and Lauder, 1999; Butler, 1998, 1997; Taylor and Henry, 1994) and replace them with an individuating discourse of 'opportunity' from which only a privileged few actually stand to benefit (Edwards, 1993).

While debate continues about the 'rationality' of markets, pragmatic players are adjusting quickly to the new environment. Various notions of 'buying', 'selling' and 'marketing' skills are gaining ground as markers of popular adoption of the new training framework. Training providers boast about graduates who can 'sell themselves' on the market, and employers boast about 'selling the skills of our people' Both use such claims in their marketing for new 'clients' (ETSA, 1997). Thus incrementally, the notion of 'skills' is being reinvented in the public imagination as a commodity in a market (Marginson, 1997; Jordan and Strathdee, 1998; Cohen, 1990).

Importantly, this reinvention is not only in the imagination, and 'skills' are being organised to have many of the same properties as other traded goods. That is, they are increasingly

being bought and sold not just for their use-value to individuals or to employers, but in order to make a profit. This is potentially a very significant change from the status quo, and makes 'learning for work' subject to the same opportunities and strictures of national and transnational regulation (such as APEC, NAFTA) as other commercial activities. This is a whole new 'playing field,' as many new providers of 'overseas training' and 'distance education/training' have already noticed, though critical scrutiny of these developments has hardly begun (see Cohen, 1997; Marginson, 1995; Calvert and Kuehn, 1993).

For the purposes of this paper, we want to shift attention slightly from these pre-occupations to several related moments which underlie and support the process of reinventing skills as a commodity in the market. These are large scale and pervasive changes in the coordination of training activity, which are central to the achievement of 'responsiveness' to industry, and have the effect of drawing new boundaries around the meaning of skill designations. These changes can be seen in both the traditional areas of 'hard skills' training, as well as in the emerging arena of 'soft skills' training, and we will turn our attention to each in turn below.

One of the earliest stages of the pursuit of 'responsiveness' on several continents has been the development of national qualification frameworks, in the form of elaborate documentary systems of standards, qualifications, and competencies (NVQF in UK, AQF in Australia, NZQF in New Zealand). Volumes have been written about these developments, pro and con, most of which need not be rehearsed here. For our purposes, qualifications frameworks are important specifically because they serve to objectify and reposition 'skills' so they can be treated less an attribute of individuals and more as a property of a work process. In the early 1990's, at the height of debates over the use of competencies as the basic unit of these frameworks, there was much criticism of this attempt to separate 'skills' from their embeddedness in individuals, and despair (amongst teachers in particular) about the narrow definition of skills which resulted. In Australia, this led to broadening the scope of the framework to include some affective competencies, over which debate still continues (Mayer, 1992; Lilly, 1997; Hager and Gonczi, 1994). Nevertheless, qualifications frameworks have made significant headway over this decade in transforming 'skill' for policy purposes into something that is seen to be measureable, standardisable, regulatable, and ultimately tradable in a market.

The rationale for the development of these frameworks, at enormous public expense, has been to develop an official statement of skill 'requirements' by occupation and industry to which training efforts could subsequently be held accountable. With the much touted promise of making training systems not only more 'responsive' to industry but 'industry-led,' the key decision-making points in the development of these frameworks have been reserved for employers (willing or not, as it turned out). This has succeeded, particularly outside Australia, in curtailing the role of unions in policy development on training. But the resulting bureaucratic labyrinth has continued to be managed not by employers but by public servants whose new mandate is to 'steer' rather than 'row.' All of this has been achieved with varying degrees of success and sustainability, as part and parcel of a framework of national and increasingly international regulation (e.g., International

Standards Organisation; and see Commonwealth of Australian and New Zealand Qualifications Framework, 1998). Also on several continents there has ensued a small but steady chorus of critics pointing out why these massive systems for defining and regulating skill are misbegotten, misguided, and "perpetuating a disaster of epic proportions." (Smithers, quoted in Forrester 1995: 177; Jackson, 1993; Hyland, 1992), but all of that is a topic for another time.

But for our analysis, a key achievement of the qualifications frameworks is the institutionalisation of modularisation ('unit standards' in N.Z.) in learning for work. This important innovation has enabled a different dimension of 'narrowing' of learning, one close to the heart of the project of 'responsiveness' and which has received a notable degree of support from many camps. Couched in the language of 'flexibility' and 'customisation' (even 'designer training') modularisation has made it possible for training providers to mix and match modules of instruction in order to 'target' programs more closely to the wishes of employers. The reform of apprenticeships illustrates very clearly the power of these arrangements, as we explore below.

Responsiveness: The Hard Skills Scenario

Over this century, apprenticeships have come to be seen as the 'classic' model of skills training that delivers substantial benefits to workers and their families, and has been won and defended by union muscle. That these arrangements have actually benefited almost exclusively white, male, heterosexual workers through highly exclusionary practices is a history that was long overlooked (Cockburn, 1985). As a result, the notion of 'apprenticeship' has come to be associated with high wages, employment security, authority in the workplace, respect in the community, and maybe even a comfortable retirement. But with economic restructuring since the late 1970's, apprenticeships have increasingly come under criticism for being 'too rigid' and 'inflexible.' Different parties to the apprenticeship system have had a range of reasons for lending some support to this critique (Ewer, 1998). But in the official, government-led reform process which has resulted, 'too rigid' has invariably been interpreted to mean too long, too costly for the employer, too much control by unions, and resulting in too much workplace power among journeypersons. Thus, a growing reluctance of employers to sign on apprenticeships in the context of economic and industrial restructuring in both private and public sectors has meant that apprenticeship programs have fallen into decline (Ewer, 1998; Marshman, 1996).

The new genre of 'apprenticeship' programs across various jurisdictions is based on training periods of much shorter duration, sometimes without the involvement of unions. They lead to certifications of more limited scope, and result in reduced wages and autonomy in the workplace. From an employer perspective, an important outcome of all this is that these new apprenticeship arrangements are less 'responsive' than in past to the objectives of unions to deliver benefits to members in the form of income, security, status, and identity. By the same token, these new arrangements are more 'responsive' to the

business 'bottom line.' This reconceptualisation of apprenticeships has its origins in industrial workplaces in the era of 'flexibility' and 'lean production.' 'Lean' production requires human labour to be more closely managed along with other resources for production. The use of body movements, time, materials and any other cost-related elements are to be minimised. This includes any levels of skill and knowledge which are not being intensively utilised (Whitley and Kristensen, 1997). When training is subjected to this criteria of 'adding value,' comprehensive and lengthy training gets redefined from 'investment' to 'waste' and the role of traditional apprentices gets redefined from 'flexible' to 'rigid.' Regaining control over training is central to dismantling these 'rigidities' in the apprenticeship system (Ewer, 1998; O'Grady, 1998).

All these issues are very well illustrated with the introduction in 1997-8 of the New Apprenticeship program in Australia. This is a very strategic, showcase initiative of the federal Liberal/National Coalition Government, which packages within a single program a number of elements of its neo-liberal agenda. New Apprenticeships are mostly 12-18 months in length, replacing in the trades areas many programs which were up to four years in length. They are meant to be available in occupations covering 80% of the labour market, can be initiated in the final year(s) of secondary school, and have no upper age limit. New Apprenticeships replace several previous programs of varying lengths serving different constituencies, offering in their place a new, streamlined 'one-stop-shopping' approach to serving training needs across the labour market (DEETYA, 1999).

The government literature promoting the new program makes no mistake about what it is 'selling' and to whom. Right off the top, the *Guide to New Apprenticeships* (DEETYA, 1999: 4) announces boldly "New Apprenticeships is about developing a simpler, more relevant training system that is responsive to the needs of users and improves the bottom-line profitability of businesses." The list of ten items under 'benefits for employers' includes:

> Simpler, more streamlined services … less red tape … simplification of documents [and] reduction of the number of forms … flexibility …. Choice of providers … ability to customise aspects of training to suit your needs … and the opportunity to secure the best deal for your business, including training incentive payments. (DEETYA, 1999: 5)

Indeed, 'incentives' to business to buy into this new initiative are generous. 'Enterprises' receive cash payments to sign on an apprentice under the program, cash bonuses upon completion, as well as subsidies toward payment of the 'training wage'. Even more importantly, New apprenticeships are 'not restricted' to new hires, which means that employers have been allowed to shift current employees onto a New Apprenticeship contracts., with incentives in tact. This has resulted in is some skepticism about the swelling numbers which feature in government rhetoric about the historic achievements of its new program (McBride, 1999; Ewer, 1998).

In addition to flexible design and generous incentives, the New Apprenticeship program offers 'responsiveness' to employers interests in the area of industrial relations as well, by promoting alternatives to the national award wage structure, which is already a target of Liberal government reform measures. As the new Guide explains in some detail, the New Apprenticeship program offers 'new and flexible employment and wage arrangements' associated with individual and enterprise-based agreements (Australian Workplace Agreements, and Certified Agreements), including part time arrangements, training periods of varying duration and varied proportions of training and productive time (DEETYA, 1999: 16). Flexibility in the ratio of 'productive' time is particularly important because the employer pays wages only on that portion of time deemed 'productive.' All up, these terms and conditions go a very long way toward shifting the infamous 'rigidities' and inventing a form of 'apprenticeship' which is vastly more responsive to employers than the one it replaces. Indeed, we might argue that the principle continuity is in the word itself.

Meanwhile, for individuals, the picture of benefits pales considerably in comparison. The list of five items under 'benefits for young people' features:

> training options which involve paid job opportunities …. The acquisition of new skills …. a nationally recognised and portable qualification which is valued in the labour market … and links to higher qualifications. (DEETYA, 1999: 6)

The contrast between the host of incentives to business and these rather minimal promises to individuals illustrates the significance of making 'enterprises' the principle clients of the new improved training system. Business reaps benefits on several levels from this new organisation of training activity. In the medium term they expect to benefit in the manner assumed in economic debates, that is through the impact of skill development on productivity. But in the current policy framework, the business community is also assured of 'benefits' up front, in the form of financial subsidies, industrial relations flexibilities, and a policy process committed to getting them the 'best deal' possible for their training efforts. In addition, there are opportunities for profit by private training organizations selling skills in the open market. Collectively these changes in the organisation of skills training, as well as the workplace significance of skilled status, deliver multiple benefits to the business community. This is the essence of 'responsiveness,' and has turned 'learning for work' into a highly politicised arena.

Meanwhile, for individuals, the gains to be expected are shrinking rapidly, as reflected in the changing language of policy documents referring to apprenticeships as well as other training 'reforms.' Ten years ago this literature was sprinkled with hopeful visions of skills recognition tied to pay rises, skills based career paths, or at least increased 'bargaining power' for individuals in the labour market. These days, writers of policy documents are hedging their bets, using language like 'enhancing employment prospects.' More worrisome is the growing idea that what individuals can expect from training is to

achieve – and maintain - basic 'employability.' According to Suzanne Snively, economist with Price Waterhouse Coopers, New Zealand, the terms of 'employability' include:

> having the right attitude, honesty, a tidy appearance, good social skills, enthusiasm, reliability, good communication skills, being computer literate, and being able to be apart of a collaborating/learning network. … People who are able to do this, and also take a disciplined approach to their work will be employable. (Skills New Zealand, 1999: 2).

Growing talk about 'employability' is a highly a moralising discourse which shifts to individuals, at all levels of the labor force, the responsibility to train – and retrain throughout their lives – in order to ensure future welfare, not only for themselves, but also for the 'enterprise' and the nation. Following Price Waterhouse Coopers above, we can see this expressed in the rise … and rise … of 'soft skills' as the new magic ingredient in the recipe for prosperous futures.

Responsiveness: The Soft Skills Scenario

If apprenticeships have been seen as the heartland of skills training, then so-called 'soft skills' might be called the new frontier. And while reform of the apprenticeship system can be seen as a kind of employer recapture of strategic terrain that had been lost to union influence, by the same token, soft skills training can be understood as a 'greenfield' site where conflicts over territory have been neither staked nor claimed. The term 'soft skills' refers to a whole range of behaviours and communicative techniques which are integral to group dynamics and thus to workplace 'culture.' During the 1990's it has become fashionable in management circles to see the 'culture' of the workplace as a resource to be managed just like other aspects of production (Salaman, 1997; Story, 1994). This has led to a steady growth of interest in 'soft skills' training for employees across the range of job classifications (Smith, 1999; Cappelli and Rogovsky, 1994) as well as a continuing interest in social and life skills training for young job seekers (Ainley and Corbett, 1994).

The arrival of soft skills has also led to a considerable flurry of interest among academics in analysing elements of 'flexible' work practice, much of it through a cultural studies lens. The 'new workplace' is described as 'reflexive' (Edwards, 1998) where workers are self-disciplining (Foucault, Casey, Miller and Rose) and 'self-creating' (Lash and Urry, du Gay) and there is an 'ethos of enterprise' (du Gay). Much of this literature focuses on the mobilising of post-modern subjectivities, which makes a long overdue contribution to social analysis of work. But often this work is self-limiting by rendering 'workplace culture' as an entity in isolation from the far reaching transformations in the social organization of accumulation, of which it is a living expression. This too is a topic much beyond the scope of the present paper. In any case, this burgeoning scholarship only reinforces our view that soft skills training is indeed an important frontier on the training agenda.

For present purposes, we have chosen to examine soft skills in the context of 'team skills' training. Teamwork is a foundational element of post-fordist models of industrial work reorganisation and has been adapted for various other 'high performance' workplaces. There is a vast management literature singing the praises of team work and a much smaller critical literature which questions whether team work is good thing and for whom, and how much of the team work frenzy is rhetoric versus reality (see Pollert, 1991). For our purposes, it is enough to know that team work usually involves people working in some kind of small groups with some sharing or rotation of tasks, with varying levels of group responsibility for decisions and accountability for outputs. Often, multiple teams in a single workplace are organised to compete with one another to achieve production targets or quality goals. Thus teams are often organised as a focus of identity and commitment in the workplace.

Like the apprenticeship reforms discussed above, the concept of team work has its origins in the emergence of 'lean production' where workers are expected to achieve increased 'efficiencies' in the form of reductions in time, materials, defects, and other elements of cost, including staff. So, for example, teams are expected to absorb the workload of any member who is off sick. In addition, the work of basic supervision, quality inspection and trouble shooting are incorporated into the functioning of the team (Story, 1994). For instance, if there are problems in individual work performance, quality of work, or frequent absenteeism, team members may be expected to find a solution amongst themselves. All of these arrangements make increased demands on individuals in the team, and these changes are seen as 'job enhancement' or 'work intensification,' depending on your point of view.

Our central concern here is to note that the capacity to carry out the various functions of teamwork are invariably introduced into the work environment as new 'skills.' Job rotation within the team will mean that new training includes some 'hard skills' which may be referred to as cross-training or multi-skilling or multi-tasking. There is ongoing controversy over whether/when learning new 'tasks' counts as acquiring new 'skills' and over the erosion of job and skill demarcations which ensue. But in addition to these hard skills, the intensification of communications between co-workers is invariably the occasion for training in areas such as 'communication skills, problem solving skills, leadership skills' and a variety of other 'soft skill' variants. Acquiring these skills is said to be increasingly essential in today's environment for all employees wishing to maintain their 'competitiveness' or indeed their 'employability' inside or outside of their current workplace. Thus, they have acquired a very central place in organising and mobilising consent for a wide range of new work regimes.

This brings us to a pivotal point in our argument, and one that draws together observations from the analysis of training in both hard skills and soft skills domains. In its centrality to new work regimes, the concept of 'skill' has become profoundly elastic. It is being used to stand for virtually any element of work practice that the employer wants to change unilaterally. In the case of teamwork, the contradictions of these arrangements come into sharp relief. In the past, boundaries between jobs have been the basis for job

classifications, pay rates, training entitlements and other forms of benefits and protections for workers. Training for job rotation through team work is part of dismantling these boundaries, and undermining the system of entitlements for workers and the power unions have had to make them stick. This is being undertaken through team skills training, and delivers clear short-term benefits to employers in terms of labour costs.

Similarly, in the area of soft skills, communications among co-workers on the job as been a terrain highly valued by unionists aiming to build solidarity among workers. It has been the incubator for collective resistance to work practices that are experienced as unsafe or unjust. Thus established forms of 'shopfloor culture,' (a malestream notion) have been oriented to workers interests as separate and distinct from, and sometimes in opposition to, those of the employer. Soft skills training for team work has the explicit goal of reversing this situation and ensuring that employers, not workers, benefit from the culture of shopfloor. 'Communication skills' and 'problem-solving skills' in the so-called 'new workplace' are specifically defined as those that enable team members to overcome resistance and to support/enhance the goals, terms and conditions of work 'required' by the employer. So, the skills of 'problem solving' and 'communication' come to include the 'skill' of convincing one's peers to put the interests of the employer (e.g., production targets) ahead of the individual or collective interests of the workers (e.g., improved working conditions) (Jackson, 1997). This is a powerful illustration of how re-definitions in the meaning of skill itself are central in the 'responsiveness' of training to the 'needs of industry.'

The Skills Solution: Who Benefits?

As the neo-liberal agenda unfolds, individuals, unions and employers – and indeed adult educators and trainers - are all faced with a quite different logic and organisation of opportunity in the name of skills training than we were a decade ago. For individuals, the old-liberal notion that skills are a private, positional good (Marginson, 1997, 1995) which will strengthen their position in the world of work gives way to a subtly altered circumstance. It is still true that increased qualifications will enhance one's position in the labour market, however relative that may be. But the opportunity increasingly on offer in the name of training is to 'acquire skills' which will give access to the workplace on terms which actually reduce individual power relative to the interests of the employer, and offer much reduced benefits of employment. Unions, for their part, are being slowly relegated to the back benches, through 'modernising' of training arrangements as surely as through industrial relations reform. These changes are the essence of 'responsiveness'

The allure of this neo-liberal agenda over the last decade has been a powerful ideological force. It has mobilised a broad consensus across a wide range of groups and institutions, organising the imagination as well as the practical arrangements of skills training policy and provision. But we are arguing here that this consensus has been achieved not on the terms sought by working people and labour unions, but on terms designed to give priority

to the agenda of capital – at both national and workplace levels – for restructuring the social relations of accumulation.

In this context, the carefully constructed public equation of skills acquisition with prosperity serves the critical function of normalising arrangements which favour business, that is, serve capital. So it is that the UK Commission on Social Justice can, without a hint of irony, write about replacing 'old conflict' with 'new social standards' defined entirely in terms of the obligations of worker to contribute to 'the productivity of their organizations.' And Skill New Zealand can translate 'company demands' into 'employee rights' without missing a beat. In the brave new world of the training gospel, only believers will be saved.

Meanwhile, for those of us who still have doubts, the relative absence of dissenting voices and alternate visions – on training like other aspects of economic and industrial policy - is a source of some concern, if not gloom. Trade unions are often too occupied with effects of restructuring and threats to their own survival to take a broad view of 'learning' as an opportunity to mobilise as part of a democratic agenda (Pollert, 1996; Forrester, 1995; Ewer, *et al*, 1991).

So, as left-minded adult educators, we have a role to play in finding a better road to walk. But we need to take heed lest we repeat the mistakes of the past, building our strategies on a critique that "falls short of a grasp of the systems underlying rationale" (Yarnit, 1995: 74). We want training policy that is 'responsive' to our concerns for social justice as well as to our hope for national prosperity. But that will not be realised by the 'more dollars/more training' - or even the more access/more equity - scenarios which currently dominate our attention. If we remain complicit, silent or seemingly 'innocent' about the politics of training in the context of workplace reform, or for that matter, about the politics of policy in the context of capital restructuring, then we will continually return to the outcomes described above. Policy will continue to be 'responsive' to the needs of industry … but at the expense of everyone else.

It is imperative to champion the cause of access to 'life long learning' and 'learning for work' as the right of all people (Forrester, Payne and Ward, 1995; Mace and Yarnit, 1987). But this is not enough. Above all else, we must focus our strategies on the criterion of 'democratic accountability' (Yarnit, 1995:69) in the footsteps of radical adult educators, men and women, for over a century.

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