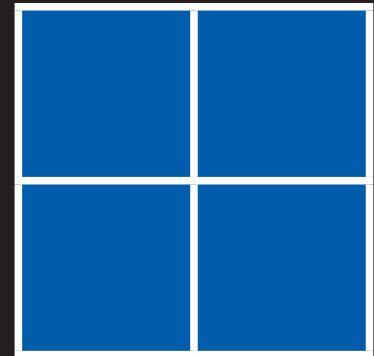


Is Workplace 'Skills for Life' Provision Sustainable in the UK?

Edmund Waite, Karen Evans and Natasha Kersh

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Is Workplace ‘Skills for Life’ Provision Sustainable in the UK?

Edmund Waite, Karen Evans and Natasha Kersh

Abstract

Since the launch of the national ‘Skills for Life’ strategy in 2001, the UK government has invested heavily in a drive to improve literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision, an important dimension of which has been the funding (largely through the former Learning and Skills Council) of ‘Skills for Life’ courses in the workplace. Drawing on longitudinal data from the ESRC-funded ‘Adult Basic Skills and Workplace learning’ project (2003-2008), together with findings from Project 2 in LLAKES Strand 3, this paper seeks to explore the key factors that facilitate and inhibit sustainable ‘Skills for Life’ workplace provision.

We draw on the metaphor of a social ecology of learning to explore the inter-relationships between individuals and groups at policy and organisational level and combine this with Michael de Certeau’s theoretical work on quotidian social practices in order to cast light on the diverse ways in which ‘Skills for Life’ provision has been put to use by learners. The paper argues that the ‘Skills for Life’ national strategy has generated a complex ‘ecology of learning’ at policy level, whereby a byzantine and shifting funding landscape, with its concomitant bureaucracy and strong emphasis on credentialism has militated against long-term sustainable provision. Those organisations that have managed to sustain provision have generally succeeded in integrating ‘Skills for Life’ courses within a broader ‘ecology of learning’ whereby there is both support and formal recognition for such provision within the organisation as a whole. The development of literacy, numeracy and ESOL courses within these organisations approximates (rather than complies fully with) the ‘Whole Organisation’ approaches advocated by ‘Skills for Life’ development agencies. Although these recommendations represent an optimum strategy for developing the capacity of organisations to deliver long-term ‘Skills for Life’ provision, the ‘third-order’ priority of learning within the workplace means that it is difficult in practice to establish sustainability in most organisations.

List of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Sustainable ‘Skills for Life’ Workplace Provision: Theoretical Perspectives	5
Organisational ‘Strategies’ and Individual ‘Tactics’	8
Case Study Analysis of Organisations that have Developed Long Term ‘Skills for Life’ Provision	13
Key Challenges to the Establishment of Sustainable ‘Skills for Life’ Provision (1): the Impact of Funding Arrangements	20
Key Challenges to the Establishment of Sustainable ‘Skills for Life’ Provision (2): the Adaptation of ‘Skills for Life’ Provision to the Workplace	26
Key Challenges to the Establishment of Sustainable ‘Skills for Life’ Provision (3): the Impact of the Economic Downturn	29
Conclusion	30
Appendix:	
Illustrative Case Study: Organisational ‘Strategies’ and Individual ‘Tactics’ in Coopers	32
References.....	37

List of Tables

Table 1: Employers’ feedback on courses at Time 2 Interviews.....	10
Appendix Table 1: Most important expected and actual benefits from the course.....	35
Appendix Table 2: Outcomes of course (item by item basis)	36

Introduction

In 1999, a government inquiry headed by Sir Claus Moser highlighted a national ‘skills crisis’ facing the UK in the form of major literacy and numeracy skills deficiencies amongst adults (DfEE 1999). Drawing on evidence from OECD surveys undertaken in the mid-1990s, the inquiry reported that 7 million adults (one in five of the UK population) had poor literacy and numeracy skills (at or below the age of an 11-year-old child) and 40% had problems with numeracy.¹ The report acted as a significant catalyst for the launch of the national ‘Skills for Life’ strategy in 2001 which channelled more than £5 billion towards ring-fenced funding for free literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision; the development of core curricula, learning materials and national qualifications based on new standards; new qualifications for initial teacher training and professional development for teachers; and the setting of challenging national targets for the achievement of qualifications. An important component of this strategy entailed major investment in the funding of literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision in the workplace in the form of discrete literacy, numeracy and ESOL courses in the workplace, literacy embedded in IT courses, literacy embedded in vocational and job-specific training as well as ‘Skills for Life’ courses undertaken in online learning centres (funded via learndirect) in the workplace.

The publication of the Leitch Review of Skills in 2006 (an independent review by Lord Sandy Leitch commissioned by the British government in 2004) and the subsequent launch of the ‘Train to Gain’ initiative (which was both a brokerage scheme to provide advice to businesses across England as well as an elaborate training scheme to fund full Level 2 and ‘Skills for Life’ provision for adults within the workplace) further extended UK policy emphasis on the significance of ‘Skills for Life’ workplace provision. Despite a dearth of evidence relating to the impact of basic skills courses on productivity (Ananiadou et al, 2003), the government’s rationale for investing in ‘Skills for Life’ provision throughout this period has been largely economic in nature: the development of literacy and numeracy skills amongst lower-level employees is deemed to be a vital means of enhancing the UK’s global economic competitiveness (Wolf and Evans, 2011, p.15).

¹ See OECD (1997) for a description of the IALS data on which the Moser Committee based its recommendations. More recently, the ‘Skills for Life’ Needs Survey of 2002/03 produced a lower indication of those adults who struggle with literacy, with an estimate of 5.8 million people below Level 1 (Williams, 2003).

Drawing on longitudinal data from the ‘Adult Basic Skills and Workplace learning’ project (2003-2008) together with findings from Project 2 in LLAKES Strand 3 research, this paper seeks to explore the key factors that facilitate and inhibit sustainable ‘Skills for Life’ workplace provision. The ‘Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning’ project was based on structured interviews with 564 learners in 53 organisations from a variety of sectors (including transport, local government, food manufacturing, engineering and health) as well as structured interviews with the relevant managers and tutors at the selected sites.² Each learner was also assessed early on in the course using an assessment tool that was designed by NFER for the project and which was especially designed to take account of small changes in literacy development. Follow-up structured interviews and literacy assessments were undertaken in order to trace developments in literacy levels and working practices over time. In addition, two phases of in-depth interviews were undertaken with a sub-sample of 66 learners from 10 sites as well as with their relevant managers and tutors. Further research into ‘Skills for Life’ workplace provision, based on this original data set together with case study research on organisations that have established provision under Train to Gain, is being undertaken within Strand 3 of the LLAKES research programme. Strand 3 is concerned with the social, economic and cultural factors that influence and impede individuals’ attempts to control their lives, and their ability to respond to and manage opportunities.

The challenges associated with sustainable provision were manifested at an early stage of the ‘Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning’ project. At 40 sites, courses that seemed ‘firm’ enough to be entered on our database (with, in some cases, manager interviews completed) collapsed at an early stage of the course.³ This occurred either because learners failed to enrol or apparently secure funding did not materialise. Only 10 of the 53 sites were still running ‘Skills for Life’ provision at the time of the ‘Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning’ Time 2 interviews. Follow up research undertaken during 2009 and 2010 as part of Project 2 in LLAKES Strand 3, involving follow up interviews with the 53 sites, has established that only seven sites may be described as having durable provision that has been sustained during the time-scale of these research projects. In their research into the impact of policy on ‘Skills

² Almost two-thirds of the learners were male with an average age of just over 40. Almost all of these individuals were in permanent full-time employment at the time of the interview. The average length of employment with the current employer was almost 8 years.

³ As a result of the early termination of these courses, these sites were not included in the sample of the ‘Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning’ project.

for Life' provision in the workplace, Finlay et al similarly commented on the scarcity of long-term provision which they described in terms of 'flowers in the desert': 'provision that grows, develops and blossoms quickly with the injection of funding, but which is susceptible to changes in resourcing and, like flowers in the desert, can wither as quickly as it grew.' (Finlay et al, 2007, 244). In light of the priority accorded to 'Skills for Life' workplace provision as well as the potential benefits associated with organisational capacity to sustain provision, the notable scarcity of long-term workplace 'Skills for Life' courses calls for an analysis of some of the key underlying challenges to sustainability.

Sustainable 'Skills for Life' Workplace Provision: Theoretical Perspectives

In examining workplace provision, including the factors that facilitate and inhibit sustainability, it is important to take account of three scales of activity (Evans, Hodkinson, Rainbird and Unwin, 2006). At the 'macro' level, wider social structures and social institutions can be fundamental in enabling or preventing effective learning from taking place. This includes the legal frameworks that govern employees' entitlements, industrial relations and the role of trades unions as well as the social structuring of business systems. In the case of the latter, Whitley has shown how work systems in different countries contrast in the ways they structure and control how work is allocated, performed and rewarded: '...these systems are linked to the nature of firms, interest groups, and dominant governance principles or 'rules of the game' in different societies, which in turn stem from different patterns of industrialization.' (Whitley, 2000, 88).

At the intermediate scale of activity, the nature of the learning environment in the organisation can expand or restrict learning (Fuller and Unwin, 2004). Establishing cultures that support expansive learning environments is problematic. For most employers, workers' learning is not a priority and a lower-order decision. As Evans et al (2006) have noted, first-order decisions concern markets and competitive strategy. These in turn affect second-order strategies concerning work organisation and job design. In this context, workplace learning is likely to be a third-order strategy (see also Keep and Mayhew, 1999). This means that improvements to workers' learning always have to be balanced against other priorities. The interdependencies of interests play out as senior managers exert influence over the culture of an organisation and its approach to supporting workplace learning. These affect the

expectations of managers, trainers, employees and their representatives. However, corporate expectations are rarely transmitted into practice in large and complex organisations, as workforce development policies ‘as espoused’ at the top of the organisation often depart substantially from workforce development as enacted by middle management and may be far removed from the development and support actually experienced by employees, particularly those in low-graded jobs (see Felstead et al, 2007).

For the individual worker, their past experiences, dispositions and present situation will affect the extent to which they take advantage of the opportunities afforded by their immediate work environment. These factors change over time. Professionals and other highly qualified workers are more likely to have access to continuing training and professional development than less-qualified workers (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2006) and are more likely to experience work environments that are rich in opportunities for learning than workers in lower-level jobs.

The social ecology metaphor provides a useful avenue for exploring the complexity and inter-dependence of factors that impact on learning at all three levels (Evans et al, 2010). Applications of ecological conceptualisations are found in studies ranging from macro-level analyses of organisations to ecologies of the inner workings of social groups. Recent applications to educational policy-making attempt to make visible the complexities of policy processes as interdependent and political, to incorporate ‘the messy workings of widely varying power relations, along with the forces of history, culture, economics and social change.’ (Weaver-Hightower, 2008, 154). According to Weaver-Hightower’s overview, the four categories of *actors, relationships, environments and structures, processes* lie at the heart of social ecological analyses. These differ in the degree of significance that is accorded to personal agency, through which actors ‘depending on their resources and power, are able to change ecological systems for their own benefit’ (ibid, 156). Because ecologies are self-sustaining through interdependencies that operate without centralized controls, individuals and groups have spaces in which to exercise agency in ways that can influence the whole dynamic, through the interdependencies involved. While applications in policy studies sometimes focus on the ways in which resistance is exercised through the collective agency of (for example) teachers’ unions or pressure groups, more often than not the account shows how agency is eventually ‘squeezed out’ through the power relations that operate over time in favour of those most powerfully placed.

Another family of approaches that has adopted a social- ecological metaphor starts with the ‘learning individual’ as the unit of analysis, as can be seen in social psychological research (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1979) or, more recently, in the context of life-course research (e.g. Biesta and Tedder, 2007). Biesta and Tedder (2007) argue that people do not act *in* structures and environments – they act *through* them. This resonates with conceptualizations of agency as bounded rather than structured (Evans, 2002). Individuals’ beliefs in their ability to change their situation by their own efforts, individually or collectively, are significant for the development of skills at work and beyond (Evans, 2002). These beliefs change and develop over time and according to experiences in the labour market and beyond. The ability to translate these beliefs into action is achieved rather than possessed (Biesta and Tedder, 2007) and capabilities are limited by bounds that can be loosened (Evans 2002, 2007).

In considering these scales of activity, it is important to avoid assumptions about the straightforward dissemination of educational policy but instead explore the contestation, selective appropriation and interpretation of educational initiatives at the policy, organisational and individual level. As Ball (1998 cited in Weaver-Hightower 2008, p. 153) states, ‘most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence, text production, dissemination and, ultimately, re-creation in contexts of practice.’

De Certeau’s (1984) conceptual distinction between ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics’ is useful in allowing for an exploration of the intended and unintended consequences of ‘Skills for Life’ educational initiatives at the organisational and individual level. In his analysis of the uses to which social representation and modes of social behaviour are put by individuals and groups, de Certeau links ‘strategies’ with institutions and structures of power, while ‘tactics’ are employed by individuals to create space for themselves in environments defined by ‘strategies’. Strategies are only available to subjects of ‘will and power,’ because of their access to a spatial or institutional location that allows them to objectify the rest of the social environment: ‘A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper (*propre*) and thus serve as a basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, ‘clienteles,’ ‘targets,’ or ‘objects of research’’) (De Certeau 1984, 35). Although individuals lack a space of their own from which to apply strategies, they remain active agents through ongoing tactical practices which continuously re-signify and disrupt the schematic ordering of reality produced through the strategic practices of the powerful.

Through his analysis of a variety of everyday practices, such as talking, reading, moving about, shopping and cooking, de Certeau (ibid) illustrates his claim that everyday life works by a process of ‘poaching on the territory of others,’ recombining the rules and products that already exist in culture through a process of ‘bricolage’ that is influenced, but never wholly determined, by those rules and products. The act of reading a book, for example, is described as a silent or hidden process of production (a ‘poiēsis’) ‘which makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient’ (ibid, XX1). In keeping with post-modernist literary criticism, de Certeau suggests that ‘every reading modifies its object...one literature differs from another less by its text than by the way in which it is read’ (ibid, 169). De Certeau’s theoretical work underlines the importance of taking account of the subterranean significance of individual engagement with social ecological patterns of behaviour:

The Greeks called these ‘ways of operating’ *mētis*. But they go much further back, to the immemorial intelligence displayed in the tricks and imitations of plants and fishes. From the depths of the ocean to the streets of modern megalopolises, there is a continuity and permanence in these tactics’ (ibid, X1X).

As will be seen in more detail in the next section, the use of literacy and numeracy provision in organisational ‘strategies’ is not always congruent with the broader ‘Skills for Life’ national strategy which privileges the economic goal of developing literacy and numeracy skills in order to raise productivity. At the level of the individual, learners have engaged with ‘Skills for Life’ provision in order to pursue a wide array of goals that relate to their diverse and shifting life-styles. In de Certeau’s terms, they have ‘tactically’ employed the opportunities that are afforded by ‘Skills for Life’ provision by using them with respect to ends and references that are not confined to the highly economic agenda that underpins these interventions.

Organisational ‘Strategies’ and Individual ‘Tactics’

Despite the highly economic rationale underpinning ‘Skills for Life’ workplace provision, the majority of personnel managers interviewed as part of the ABSWL project cited the importance of boosting the general development of employees as the primary motivation for delivering ‘Skills for Life’ courses rather than the need to address deficiencies in literacy and

numeracy skills. Underpinning this goal lay a variety of motivations relating to the need to boost staff morale, foster a positive company ethos and enhance corporate solidarity as well as address unequal access to training opportunities amongst lower-level employees. In many cases, the courses were regarded as a useful means of compensating employees for the frequently routine and menial nature of their work. A manager of a bus company in the East Midlands, for example, outlined the demanding and tedious nature of the drivers' work and stated: 'We can't change the conditions so we are trying to find other ways to make them feel better about themselves, their job and ultimately the company.' Many employees spoke English as a second language (ESOL learners represented a sizeable 35% of the full sample whereas the current UK workforce is made up of only 3% of employees who do not speak English as their first language) and there was interest in improved communication, though it was rarely seen as central to job performance.⁴

During the course of Time 2 interviews, over half of managers stated it was impossible to ascertain what the impact or perceived impact on the enterprise had been. In the other cases, eleven judged the course to have been very successful. In five cases, the improvement in the communication skills, and especially the verbal skills, of ESOL learners was the main valued outcome. In the other six sites, learners were native speakers, and two offered individual stories of individuals who had progressed to further learning. In four, there was a general conviction that it had improved morale, openness to change and confidence but no specific examples could be offered.

The ten cases where responses were less positive included a couple where the literacy had been embedded in an NVQ, and no distinct literacy-related outcomes had been noticed. In other cases, either attendance had been poor, or tutors had chopped and changed, or there was simply no particular positive impact that the employers had observed.

⁴ Employers underwrote participation in paid working time. All sites incurred organisational costs, not least in negotiations with line managers over shifts; many provided equipment and furnished teaching space.

Table 1: Employers' feedback on courses at Time 2 Interviews⁵

	Number	%
'A little' successful	5	10
Moderately successful	5	10
Very successful	11	23
Manager currently in post knows nothing of the course and/or is unable to provide any feedback on its effects	21	43
Site no longer exists because of reorganisation or total closure of company	7	14

While companies and public sector organisations have utilized 'Skills for Life' provision to pursue a variety of 'strategic' objectives- relating largely to the need to develop the psychological contract between employer and employee - learners have 'tactically' insinuated an even more diverse array of goals and understandings into the experience of undertaking a literacy, numeracy and ESOL course in the workplace. Quantitative data from Time 1 and Time 2 of the ABSWL project revealed that employees were motivated to engage in workplace 'Skills for Life' provision by a far wider range of factors than merely the wish to improve performance at work (see Table 1 and 2 in the Appendix). During the course of in-depth interviews, learners divulged in more detail a whole range of factors for engagement in such courses: from 'curiosity' to wanting to make up for missed earlier educational opportunities; from wanting specific help with job-relevant skills to wider career aims; from a

⁵ During the course of Time 2 interviews, we asked personnel managers for a general evaluation of the Skills for Life courses, specific outcomes and concrete examples. Table One summarises the general evaluations provided by the managers.

desire to help children with school work to wanting self-improvement and personal development (Evans et al, 2009).

During the course of in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of 64 employees from ten sites, the majority of learners self-reported that they coped adequately with their existing literacy and numeracy skills in the workplace. Some 20 learners mentioned that they struggled with aspects of literacy or numeracy in general (whether at work or home), of whom only 11 learners revealed that poor literacy or numeracy skills had either adversely affected their work or prevented them from fulfilling career plans. In this respect it is important to take account of the wide variation of literacy practices in differing organisational contexts; whereas some employees (e.g. care-workers in residential care homes) remarked upon an increase in report-writing in response to auditing demands and more onerous health and safety regulations, the majority of employees were engaged in occupations that entailed the persistence of routine work in which there was negligible use of literacy and numeracy practices. Such findings are compatible with a growing corpus of research that has underlined the persistence of relatively routine or manual employment in large swathes of the UK economy (see Felstead et al, 2007; Keep and Mayhew, 1999; Lloyd et al, 2008).

In-depth interviews also cast light on the wide range of individual and social strategies for coping with existing literacy and numeracy skills (e.g. reliance on colleagues and supervisors for support with form-filling) as well as the significance of ‘informal learning’ in developing these skills in a variety of workplace contexts.⁶

For many learners, participation in workplace ‘Skills for Life’ courses yielded a range of positive outcomes in terms of increased confidence, greater willingness to engage in further learning, enhanced awareness and appreciation of the English language, increased capacity to help children with their homework and increased motivation to pursue a range of hobbies and educational interests (See also Table 2 in the Appendix).

In de Certeau’s (1984) terms, learners have effectively ‘made of’ the knowledge and skills afforded by workplace ‘Skills for Life’ provision- in a ‘hidden’ or ‘secondary’ process of production- by using them with respect to references and ends that relate to their diverse and

⁶ See Evans and Waite (2008, 2010) for an analysis of the interweaving of ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ learning opportunities related to workplace ‘Skills for Life’ provision.

frequently shifting life-styles. Organisations' promotion of 'Skills for Life' courses for largely generic rather than job-specific considerations has provided a broad domain for the pursuit of individual 'tactics' which variously intersect and diverge from company strategic objectives according to the complex inter-relationship between learner-specific considerations and organisational imperatives. In the Appendix, we provide an illustrative case study to exemplify the interaction between company strategic objectives and the 'tactical' concerns of learners in one organisational setting; that of Coopers, a food manufacturing company in the North-East of England.

The workplace as a site of learning has provided an effective channel for many learners to address wider personal and educational goals. During the course of in-depth interviews, many learners linked low levels of confidence to previously negative educational experiences at school and elsewhere. As stated in other publications (e.g. Evans and Waite, 2009), the accessibility and convenience of 'Skills for Life' workplace provision, together with the advantages of learning in a familiar setting that is less prone to the intimidating associations of more formal educational institutions, has been effective in attracting learners who have had previously negative educational experiences.

Employees were highly positive in their overall evaluations on the courses. On a scale from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest), 40% gave a grade of 7, 72% one of 6 or 7, and only 12% less than 5. Nonetheless, the measurable impact on them was very modest (Wolf et al, 2010; Wolf and Evans, 2011). There were no statistically significant improvements in mean scores for measured literacy for native speakers taking the sample as a whole. However, a more differentiated and detailed analysis revealed considerable diversity in literacy attainment patterns. Those who reported learning new skills during the course had an increase in reading score of four points more than those that did not. Conversely, those who reported that the course had no benefits for them, or who found the course too easy, had growth in reading scores of six points less (Wolf and Evans, 2011, 84). These findings may well reflect variation among learners in how appropriate the course was for their specific needs.

ESOL learners (who represented a sizeable 35% of the full sample) did make some progress, but it was unclear whether this was because of the courses or because of longer exposure to English. The analysis of longitudinal literacy assessments together with data from in-depth interviews (which allowed for more detailed and contextualised understanding of literacy

practices in different workplace contexts) established that those learners who made the most significant gains in literacy scores (between Time 1 and Time 2) had generally continued to develop their writing skills in the workplace and beyond (Evans and Waite, 2010).

In addition, course participants were somewhat more likely than equivalent workers in the general population to take further education and training, and the majority reported reading more. There were no major changes in job satisfaction (though there was also very little room for improvement here, since learners registered high levels of satisfaction with every aspect of their jobs other than pay before, as well as after, course participation).

Overall, there were also no significant changes in measures of behaviour and dispositions which might have contributed to organisational capital and productivity, such as willingness to suggest changes in work practices, or extent and density of contacts with other workers. However, as with the attainment results, this may mask variations within the sample which merit further investigation.

Case Study Analysis of Organisations that have Developed Long Term 'Skills for Life' Provision

Out of the 53 sites recruited for the 'Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning' Project, 11 of these are currently running 'Skills for Life' provision in 2010: 4 public sector organisations (2 local authorities, 1 hospital, 1 public sector transport company), 6 private sector companies and 1 charity.

Only 7 sites may be described as having reasonably durable provision during the project time-scale in so far as provision was running at the time of ABSWL Time 1, Time 2 and follow up LLAKES research interviews. Four sites can be described as having 'intermittent' provision in so far as courses were not running at the time of Time 2 interviews but had been revived at the time of LLAKES follow up interviews in 2009-2010. The organisations that succeeded in developing long-term provision throughout the duration of this time-scale were:

Southern Transport Systems (STS)

STS is a large transport provider with approximately 17,000 employees. The company has been running English, Maths, IT and dyslexia courses at learning centres (which are well-

equipped with computers and are designed to provide a comfortable and accessible space for learning) since the publication of the Moser report in 1999. Although the learning infrastructure at STS has undergone major upheaval, following company merger and expansion in 2006 and a subsequent 40% reduction in the human resources budget, the company still employs one manager and four tutors to undertake 'Skills for Life' provision and is therefore not dependent on funding from government.

Some courses have been conceived in response to organisational re-structuring or a specific skills-gap identified by managers and employees; for example a report-writing course was customised for track workers in response to complaints from their managers. Small group sessions are provided for employees who suffer from dyslexia (who attend on the basis of self-referral or referral by line-managers) by a specialized dyslexia tutor who is paid by the company. In addition, the company runs GCSE Maths and English courses on an annual basis, which currently have 17 and 12 learners respectively. The majority of learners who attend these latter courses tended to be motivated by a wide range of factors such as personal interest and development, the wish to help children with homework and longer-term career goals.

Thorpton Local Authority in London

Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) have played an important role in implementing a succession of 'Skills for Life' courses at Thorpton local authority's learning centre (which is located on the premises of a refuse centre) in partnership with the learning centre manager and local colleges. The courses, entitled 'IT and English' and 'Communication Skills at Work' last for 6 hours a week over a 5 weeks period and are designed for a range of 'front-line' staff including cleaners, caretakers and refuse collectors. Funded by the Learning and Skills Council (via the local colleges) and facilitated by the local authority's release of employees during working hours, the courses aim to give the learners a chance to 'brush up' or improve their literacy skills with the chance to take national tests at Level 1 or 2.

The learning centre is currently still running discrete literacy and numeracy courses (Train to Gain funded via a local college) which last for 5 weeks (1 day a week). The learners take literacy and numeracy qualifications at Level 1 and 2. The learners come from different departments on the basis of 'word of mouth' and there is currently a waiting list of 30 or 40 council employees. The learning centre manager uses the support of the chief executive

officer in order to persuade line managers of the merits of these courses. However, in recent interviews the centre manager expressed fears for the future of the learning centre as a result of the difficult economic climate.

Lindall PLC

Lindall PLC is a food manufacturing company in Cornwall with 700 employees. The company has been delivering literacy courses for its shop floor workers as well as an ESOL course for Kurdish employees since 2003. The 'Skills for Life' courses have depended entirely on the initiative of the personnel manager who has conducted an informal audit of literacy and numeracy needs and established ties with the local college. The courses, which take place in the learners own time, have had an important effect in boosting confidence and facilitating compliance with health and safety regulations. The courses have also allowed employees to provide more accurate documentation relating to their handover to colleagues in the next shift. However the manager stresses largely generic motivations for running the courses: 'If you have your focused business head on you would say 'this is all they need to do the job.' If you had a more social hat on you would say 'that's great we could get people qualifications, help them develop themselves.'

The challenge of drawing on sustained funding for 'Skills for Life' provision together with the complexity of arranging courses that fit in with the company's four different shifts have posed major barriers for the training manager who admits that 'it takes masses amount of effort to make it work and carry on.' The manager has also had to work hard to promote and sustain demand for 'Skills for Life' provision amongst employees who are sometimes prone to attach a degree of stigma to such courses: 'They are very proud men who work in manufacturing. They don't always want other people to know about their literacy or numeracy problems.'

Brandon Care Home

Brandon is a purpose-built village community for people with learning disabilities, employing 354 staff. The organisation has delivered a series of ESOL and literacy courses since 2004 for approximately 150 learners, consisting largely of care workers from the Philippines as well as some 'home managers' (responsible for managing homes within the

village) who have needed to develop their literacy skills for report-writing. The courses were initially funded by the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA), followed by the Employer Training Pilot (ETP) and currently Train to Gain funding. The training manager at Brandon has also drawn on ESF (European Social Fund) funding for learners who have been in the country for less than 3 years. As in the case of many ESOL courses, the learners have seen a direct link between the course and skills requirements at work. During the course of Time 2 interviews, the manager stated that the courses had been ‘very successful’ in boosting the confidence of care workers to communicate and work as part of a team. In recent interviews (2010), the manager described the courses as ‘invaluable’ since they have ‘increased the confidence’ of employees in ‘speaking and answering in English.’

Melford Hospital

Melford hospital has delivered literacy and numeracy course for hospital employees during working hours (initially with the assistance of Workforce Confederation funding to finance some of the release costs). The courses were regarded as being ‘very successful’ by the training manager during the course of Time 2 interviews on the basis of ‘heightening awareness within the organisation that staff may be struggling with literacy problems, providing an opportunity for managers to talk to staff about their difficulties, enabling us to provide training to support an identified need and encouraging people who have had a bad experience at school to return to learning.’ Learners cited increased confidence as being an important outcome of the courses. The courses also facilitated the capacity of care assistants to complete paper work relating to the handover between shifts.

The hospital is currently delivering online ‘Skills for Life’ provision which entails running four half day sessions by tutors from the local college who provide online initial assessments as well as individual learning plans. The learners are expected to attend at least these four half day sessions as well as undertake online learning in their own time. The Training, Education and Development manager recognizes that it can be problematic for learners with literacy and numeracy needs to learn on computers: ‘If you have learners who struggle with literacy and numeracy they are not always going to be confident using a computer. That’s why we have additional support from the tutor.’ The sessions are tailored to the specific needs of the learners: ‘The software has the facility to report a skills gap. If a common skills

gap is identified across the group, the tutor can teach a session that will address that particular need.’

Finross City Council

Finross city council has delivered literacy, numeracy and ESOL courses for council employees since 1999 on the basis of funding from the Scottish Executive. The council has been delivering ‘Skills for Life’ provision each year to an average of 100 council employees since 2003. At Time 2 interviews of the ‘Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning’ project, the manager described the courses as being ‘very successful’ and highlighted a boost in learners’ confidence as being the most important impact: ‘increased levels of confidence have been reported by both learners and managers. This has been the first experience of any learning outside school for many people- it is empowering.’ Current ‘Skills for Life’ provision consists mainly of ‘Communications for Work’ courses (preparing council employees for Scottish Vocational Qualifications), support for modern apprentices and computer literacy for council employees. The impact of the economic downturn has resulted in the loss of one full-time tutor (there is now only one full-time ‘Skills for Life’ tutor) as well as a reduction in the size of the local authority’s learning centre. However, the ‘Skills for Life’ courses are underpinned by a ‘corporate commitment’ to develop literacy and numeracy skills amongst council employees as well as in the local area which is reflected in ‘awareness training’ for managers at all levels as well as opportunities to develop literacy skills through personal development plans.

Baden PLC

Baden PLC is an ‘asset management’ company with 54, 000 employees. The company originally ran ‘Literacy and ESOL’ courses for cleaners (at Time 1 of the ABSWL project) in order to ‘reduce errors and improve health and safety.’ The company is now working on a national basis with a training provider in order to combine the delivery of NVQs related to cleaning and security with literacy qualifications. Approximately 15 members of the company training team have been involved in conducting literacy and numeracy assessments with staff (using an ICT-based initial assessment). As of May 2010, 400 ‘Skills for Life’ initial assessments have been undertaken with staff in London and South East England. Approximately ‘30 or 40%’ of these learners have proceeded to gain qualifications in the form of NVQs in cleaning and security, BICS (British Institute of Cleaning Services) Level 1 and Literacy Level 2. Since the company is dependent on a large number of employees who

do not speak English as a first language, the 'Skills for Life' provision is highly valued. The company has not permitted the training provider to deliver group sessions and therefore the literacy provision is usually carried out on a one to one basis (for example during employees' lunch breaks), with a strong reliance on the learners' self-study of 'Skills for Life' resources. The 'Skills for Life' and vocational provision has the full support of senior management and the company's chief executive officer has signed the 'Skills Pledge'.

Analysis of the Case Study Organisations

The highlighted case study organisations have generally managed to garner broader support for 'Skills for Life' provision throughout the organisation as whole. 'Skills for Life' provision at STS systems, which takes place at the company library as well as various learning centres, benefits from an elaborate learning infrastructure as well as the support of senior management. Thorpton Council have succeeded in developing effective 'Skills for Life' provision on the basis of a partnership between union learning representatives, the company learning centre manager and local colleges. According to the manager of the learning centre, 'The chief executive is really on board and pushes it. Everyone knows the CEO is supportive of training so that helps us a lot.' The learning centre manager uses the support of the CEO in order to persuade line managers of the merits of training: 'If I come across a manager who is not so keen I can say that this is something that the CEO has been pushing.' Similarly, Chris Turner, a senior manager at Thorpton Local Authority, stresses the importance of the participation of the whole organisation:

So a number one lesson would be get senior management support. Number 2 that needs to be communicated all the way down the line, directors (we met with all the directors in all the departments), then it goes down to departmental managers and then supervisors. So you need to find out who your champions are at the supervisor level. It's absolutely crucial and when it all comes in to practice, when you've got support all the way down the line, and the union as well gives support, then you've got a basis to work on.

'Skills for Life' provision in Finross City Council similarly benefits from a broader organisational commitment to develop literacy skills amongst both council employees as well as in the local community despite recent financial cutbacks as a result of the economic downturn. Melford Hospital has effectively adapted provision to allow for increased

flexibility in patterns of learning. The long-term sustainability of provision at Brandon care home can be attributed to a positive learning environment within the organisation as a whole as well as the relevance of the ESOL courses in responding to the work requirements of the care workers.

‘Skills for Life’ development agencies promote the importance of establishing ‘whole organisation’ approaches to the development of ‘Skills for Life’ provision in the workplace and other sectors ‘where consideration of literacy, language and numeracy (‘Skills for Life’) provision is central to the whole organisation at all levels, ranging from strategic leadership and management to the delivery of all services, including those involving training and development.’ (QIA 2008, 10). The Skills for Life Improvement Programme (SfLIP), which is run by the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), recommends that large employers develop a variety of measures to foreground ‘Skills for Life’ provision within the organisation as a whole including: the establishment of a Steering group with representatives at all levels, the support of senior management commitment with a ‘Skills for Life’ champion, the incorporation of ‘Skills for Life’ priorities into policies, procedures and plans, the production of SMART action plans to assign responsibilities for embedding ‘Skills for Life’ throughout the organisation and all training areas, the undertaking of a training needs analysis and staff surveys, the use of embedded resources, the cultivation of positive relationships between management and trade union learning representatives, the creation of an accessible and supportive learning centre, the formulation of a reward system and the showcasing of success stories, and the creation of local employer cluster groups (QIA, 2008).

Six out of the seven highlighted sites managed to implement provision that approximated (without complying fully with) these ‘whole organisation’ approaches. Lindall PLC represents an exceptional case in so far as provision within this company depended on the work of one personnel manager. Provision within this company would therefore appear to be most vulnerable since it is entirely dependent on the hard work and determination of an individual ‘key player’. In all these sites, ‘Skills for Life’ provision has been effectively integrated into an organisational ‘ecology of learning’ in so far as provision has effectively responded to a clearly identified need in the workplace as well as catering for the diverse interests and motivations of learners outside the workplace. In STS systems, courses have

responded to increased report-writing in certain sectors of the organisation as well as allowing for learners to pursue generic interests (including courses that have allowed learners to undertake GCSEs in English). The two local authorities (Finross and Thornton) have effectively used ‘Skills for Life’ provision to respond to increased report writing amongst employees and have established learning centres that provide accessible and non-intimidating spaces for learning. The courses at Lindall have also facilitated the capacity of employees to respond to the increasing ‘textualisation’ (Scheeres 2004) of the workplace (e.g. in the form of health and safety regulations) as well as fostering the personal development of employees. Training managers at Brandon Care home have been adept at drawing on online learning in order to facilitate a more flexible ‘ecology of learning’ within this organisation.

In embracing wide ranging motivations for learning (rather than focusing exclusively on addressing literacy and numeracy skills deficiencies), these organisations have provided a broad institutional space for learners to tactically ‘make of’ their learning in order to pursue an array of personal goals. It is noteworthy that all these organisations are large employers with sufficient resources to uphold the wide-ranging benefits of learning and establish a robust learning infrastructure. This is consistent with research undertaken on US literacy provision in the workplace which found that larger firms (those with more than 500 employees) were more likely to establish longer-term courses (Nelson, 2004).⁷

Key Challenges to the Establishment of Sustainable ‘Skills for Life’

Provision (1): the Impact of Funding Arrangements

Following the onset of the ‘Skills for Life’ national strategy in 2001, the majority of funding for workplace ‘Skills for Life’ provision was allocated directly through the Learning and Skills Council which paid the providers of courses largely on a fee-per-student basis. As a way of paving the way for the full-scale development of ‘Skills for Life’ workplace provision, the government supported a number of ‘Pathfinder’ post-compulsory education projects in deprived areas.

⁷ This research also found that courses that continued over the long-term (after initial funding had ceased) shared the common features of: ‘an internal champion who had decision-making power or knew how to influence those who did, a well-identified internal issue or problem, and evidence that the program had helped to address that issue’ (Nelson, 2004).

In addition, the Treasury financed ‘Employer Training Pilots’ between 2002 and 2005. A forerunner of ‘Train to Gain’, the ETPs ran in 12 areas (in 2002-4 for six, in 2003-5 for six) and were intended to address a supposed ‘market failure’ in the provision of training. Nationally, around 10% of ETP learners were engaged in stand-alone basic skills courses (Hillage and Mitchell, 2004: 61). Other important sources of funding that continue to allocate funds to ‘Skills for Life’ provision include The European Social Fund (which has provided some funding for workplace ‘Skills for Life’ provision through the Regional Development Agencies), Learn Direct (run by Ufi, originally the ‘University for Industry’) which provides courses that are entirely IT-based and can be accessed on a drop-in basis by registered learners and the Union Learning Fund (established in 1998 in order to encourage the take up of learning in the workplace). Alongside the ULF, the government introduced measures to encourage the appointment and training of Union Learning Representatives, who work with employees and facilitate workplace learning, and imposed obligations on unionised companies to assist ULRs. Grants to unions through the Fund pay for the training of Union Learning Representatives, and also support full-time field officers who can help set up and organise workplace learning. Many of the sites in our sample – nineteen in all – had active ULRs, who persuaded and encouraged managers to approach providers and sponsor courses, and some sites were involved in special projects with full-time staff.

From 2006 onwards, the majority of government funding for ‘Skills for Life’ workplace provision has been channelled through Train to Gain which is both ‘a brokerage scheme which provides impartial, independent advice on training to businesses across England’ as well as an elaborate training scheme which was nationally rolled out in 2006 to fund full Level 2 and ‘Skills for Life’ provision for adults within the workplace. In response to the Leitch review, the government adopted new Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets in 2007 which aim to ensure that ‘95% of the working age population achieve the basic skills of functional literacy and numeracy by 2020’. To work towards the Leitch targets the LSC agreed the following PSA delivery plan with DIUS. From August 2008 until July 2011 (3 years): 597,000 people of working age to achieve a first level 1 or above approved literacy qualification. 390,000 to achieve a first entry level 3 or above approved numeracy qualification (reference LSC fact sheet 12). As part of ‘additional flexibilities’ added to Train to Gain, the LSC announced in July 2008 that full literacy and numeracy qualifications at

Entry Level 1-3, Level 1 and Level 2 would be fully funded irrespective of prior attainment (Linford 2009, 98).

In Scotland, local authorities receive block grants under the Scottish Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, and have a major degree of control over their own priorities. Providers are not contracted to provide specific numbers of qualifications (or, indeed, enrolments). Two sites in the study were funded through local authorities in this way.

The Impact of Regular Changes to Funding Arrangements

The major changes to funding arrangements as a result of the transition from direct LSC to Train to Gain funding, together with the complex and rapidly shifting nature of Train to Gain, has served to militate against longer-term provision. Providers have been compelled to employ a reactive, pragmatic and flexible approach to funding that is not always compatible with longer-term strategic planning and the development of sustained partnerships with organisations. Equally, training managers within companies and public sector organisations have found the rapidly shifting and complex funding arrangements difficult to navigate and utilise for the longer-term development of provision. The training manager of Brandon care home (described above) who had been adept at utilizing a range of funding sources over several years nevertheless commented on the challenges associated with funding: ‘The funding situation is so confusing...It is very time-consuming to try and work out how it works. We are large enough to look at that but other organisations won’t be able to do that.’

In addition, from the outset of the ‘Skills for Life’ national strategy, a good deal of provision has been funded in ways which were intrinsically short-term or focused on specific initiatives. The ‘Pathfinder Projects’ which were meant to develop good practice for the future provided levels of funding which could not be sustained on a one-off basis. The Employer Training Pilots, which were designed to pave the way for larger-scale funding of workplace provision and which have acted as a forerunner of Train to Gain did not lead seamlessly to further funded provision but instead left many organisations with an abrupt termination of funding. The Union Learning Fund (established in 1998) has facilitated the establishment of learning centres, the promotion of NVQs, the training of learning representatives and the development of new materials (Finlay et al, 2007, 233). We encountered many positive examples of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) who had drawn on their credibility as members of the union in order to establish courses and facilitate

existing provision. Equally the Union Learning Fund has facilitated positive partnerships between management and unions, who have bracketed industrial relations in the specific context of forging a common learning agenda. However, the allocation of funding through the auspices of the ULF has tended to focus on specific projects and has not facilitated longer-term sustainability. In an engineering company in the West Midlands, for example, Union Learning Representatives who developed ‘Skills for Life’ and computer courses became exasperated with the ULF as a result of lack of flexibility as well as support for long-term development of provision and eventually resorted to developing a partnership directly with the local college: ‘it took two years to get the funding there but then, we’ve got to use it or get it set up in a certain time scale which we couldn’t do here. So then we lost it. And then we started back up again and there is no fund there.’⁸ Similarly, the European Social Fund has been allocated on a project-specific basis in a way that has not allowed organisations to develop longer-term capacity to deliver ‘Skills for Life’ provision.⁹

The Impact of Output-related Funding Regimes

At the beginning of the ‘Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning’ project, at the stage when we were recruiting sites, it was still relatively easy to obtain funding for courses that did not lead to a qualification. The majority of sites fell into the model of 30 hours provision. Subsequent changes to funding entailed a shift towards out-put related considerations (e.g. the achievement of qualifications) and this trait has been further enshrined under Train to Gain. Under current Train to Gain funding criteria, 25% of funding is withheld until qualifications (at Entry Level, Level 1 or Level 2) have been achieved. Learners are expected to pass a qualification that is one level above their pre-existing standard (as reflected in the initial assessment). Yet to achieve such progress requires a large number of hours of tuition. For example, Comings estimates that effective literacy improvement amongst adults in the US- moving up the equivalent of a grade or school year- typically requires 150 hours of tuition (Comings, 2004).

⁸ See also Coffield et al (2007: 730) who reveal, on the basis of their TLRP funded research into the functioning of the Learning and Skills Council, that ‘Sustainability—after the short-term funding ended— was a serious concern for ULRs and managers.’

⁹ Finlay et al (2007: 239) have similarly commented on the negative impact of initiative funding on sustainability: ‘reliance on initiative funding creates problems for sustainability when the source dries up or when all the learners eligible under the rules of the particular initiative funding stream have used up their entitlement’.

In addition to creating pressures on providers (which can sometimes entail the employment of various subversive techniques to fulfil targets for qualifications) the stress on credentialism in ‘Skills for Life’ workplace provision also exacerbates the potential for diverging interests between providers and organisations. In Brightlands Bakery, a cakes and pudding manufacturer in the North-West of England, the Union Learning Representative (ULR) had been effective in establishing online courses (based at the company learning centre through learndirect) as well as group ESOL sessions for company employees in partnership with the local college. However, company- provider relations became increasingly strained and ultimately broke down altogether in 2007 (leading to the termination of the company’s contract with the college) over the issue of the provider’s emphasis on achieving qualifications. According to the ULR at the learning centre:

The main problem was with the college. They wanted to meet their own targets and draw down government funding for ‘Skills for Life’ courses. But that was not necessarily what the employees wanted. They were not listening to the individual. In the end they didn’t want to enrol more students because they were more bothered about the completion of the course.

The Lack of Profitability of ‘Skills for Life’ Provision

The lack of profitability for providers in running workplace ‘Skills for Life’ courses has served as a major impediment to durable provision. None of the organisations that had ceased offering basic skills between Time 1 and Time 2 of the ABSWL project had actively rejected the idea. Most had stopped because tuition-free courses were no longer being offered to them by providers. The vast majority of sites ran courses with a small number of learners: typically well under ten employees signed up even for the first session, and there was often a high drop-out rate thereafter. The only exceptions were the three workplaces where attendance was effectively compulsory. In a context where providers’ teaching and administrative costs were fixed, but payment was per learner, these type of small classes were generally not sustainable.

In addition, funding arrangements both before and after the introduction of Train to Gain have not accorded sufficient recognition to the costs involved in establishing ‘Skills for Life’ workplace courses. In advance of the full-scale launch of ‘Skills for Life’, the government supported a number of ‘Pathfinder’ post-compulsory education projects in deprived areas,

one of whose objectives was to develop workplace learning. Their reports indicated that it typically took 20-30 hours of negotiation with an employer before active in-house basic skills training could be organised and underway.¹⁰ In addition, ‘good practice’, as recommended by, for example, the Workplace Basic Skills Network (DfES-funded), emphasises the need to tailor content to the workplace and the individual learners. This means carrying out both an ‘Occupational Needs Analysis’ (clarifying the literacy and numeracy requirements associated with the company’s jobs) and a ‘Training Needs Analysis’.

In recent interviews with providers we were told that colleges were running ‘Skills for Life’ workplace provision at a loss in order to meet targets imposed by the Learning and Skills Council. According to one practitioner ‘Workplace ‘Skills for Life’ is still not profitable. The colleges are subsidising it. They have been given targets by LSCs and are prepared to make a loss in order to meet targets.’ There is currently still no funding for needs analysis- all funding comes out of a flat rate. Training providers, who are not able to subsidise workplace ‘Skills for Life’ provision, are more prone to deploy other methods such as reliance on learners’ self-study through distance learning materials.

Providers also struggle with the voluminous bureaucracy associated with workplace ‘Skills for Life’ provision. Train to Gain – like ETPs – is dominated by private training providers, and in 2007, the chief executives of the two largest companies gave evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills explaining how the programme works. There are 14 forms required when they take on a learner, which take about two hours to complete. Hence ‘we lose a number of people because they just cannot be bothered to go through the process, even though we hold the pen for them... To put it into perspective, I have got something like 50 people who are employed full time on processing bits of paper, which is inordinate waste’ (House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee 2007, Q273, Q274, supplementary memorandum from Dan Wright).

Changes in Political Priorities and Financial Resources

Train to Gain has been beset by problems relating to the allocation of financial resources. Over-ambitious targets led to an under-spend of £150m (out of a budget of £747m) in the first two years; the following year, a failure to anticipate increased demand because of changes in

¹⁰ Speech by the Deputy Director of the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU), DfES, Workplace Basic Skills Network International Conference 13-14 November 2002

eligibility to increase learner numbers as well as the impact of the recession led to an overspend of £50m.

A report published by the Commons Public Accounts Committee heavily criticized Train to Gain, claiming the scheme had been ‘mismanaged’ since its launch in 2006. The Committee chairman, Conservative MP Edward Leigh, declared that

In the face of evidence of what was achievable, targets for the first two years were unrealistically ambitious. The number of learners, the level of demand from employers and the capacity of training providers were at first all overestimated. By the third year, demand for training, fuelled by substantially widened eligibility for the programme and by the recession, had increased to the point where the programme could no longer be afforded.’ (BBC News at Ten Thursday, 21 January 2010).

Several providers revealed that there has been a ‘freeze’ on funding new workplace ‘Skills for Life’ courses through Train to Gain within the 2009-2010 financial year. One tutor and manager from a further education college in London, who had been successful in promoting ‘Skills for Life’ provision over several years amongst key target groups who had clearly defined literacy and numeracy requirements (such as care workers, teaching assistants and hospital support staff) expressed his frustration with the system in the following terms: ‘The demand is now stimulated but the supply has been cut off.’

Train to Gain’s brokerage scheme (whereby ‘Skills Advisers’ provide companies with advice and referral to providers) was also criticized during the course of recent follow-up interviews with tutors and managers at colleges and training providers on the basis of being cumbersome and largely ineffectual. Providers have generally sought to promote ‘Skills for Life’ workplace provision through direct contact with organisations rather than through reliance on Train to Gain’s brokerage scheme.

Key Challenges to the Establishment of Sustainable ‘Skills for Life’ provision (2): the Adaptation of ‘Skills for Life’ Provision to the Workplace

The majority of sites involved in the ABSWL project did not provide a stable learning environment in which to develop long-lasting ‘Skills for Life’ courses. In the space of just

over two years (between Time 1 and Time 2 of the ‘Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning’ project) we found that in over half of sites, there was no manager in post who had any recollection of or knowledge about the courses which had taken place.

Company employees were frequently subjected to pressure from line managers to miss sessions or abandon the course altogether in order to return to their work duties. As noted by Lucy O’Farrell (a manager and tutor at Cloville College), the majority of companies lacked a culture of organisation-wide support for ‘Skills for Life’ provision and therefore lower-level employees were particularly susceptible to pressure from line-managers to return to the shop-floor:

Our biggest problem has been in some organisations where you’ll get buy in at a higher level but then when it comes down to the direct line manager who has to continue to provide the service there are problems. For instance in a retail organisation they have to have people on the tills. At the last minute they will be stopped leaving the shop floor because there’s no one to cover the job and that has been a major problem in some places.

Similarly, the personnel manager at the Weapons Defence Establishment, outlined (in February 2010) the consequences of her failure to establish an organisational consensus in favour of workplace ‘Skills for Life’ provision:

The learners initially think the course is a good idea but then the line manager says there is insufficient cover and they won’t come in... We have good management support at the top level but line managers at the local level are frequently resistant to training even when it is free of charge. We need to educate line managers and look at ways of changing their minds- raise awareness of employees who need help with literacy.

Providers also face a range of perennial challenges relating to the difficulty of adapting ‘Skills for Life’ courses to complex shift patterns. As a ‘Skills for Life’ manager from Wakeham college in South East England mentioned, ‘Some courses are a real nightmare to run- it is difficult to find a course that suits all the students because they are all in different shifts. It is also difficult to fit the courses in with our normal working hours and the timetable of the college.’

Several representatives from providers commented that ‘Skills for Life’ funding arrangements (both before and after the onset of Train to Gain) make it very difficult to engage small and medium enterprises (SMEs). For example, Lucy O’Farrell, from Cloville College, outlined the following challenges related to undertaking courses in SMEs:

Well they need to release roughly 10 delegates at a time. So if you’re talking about a very small factory, that just doesn’t happen. We did do it in the beginning when we had more flexible funding, direct from SEEDA (Regional Development Agency) which would allow us to do virtually anything. But the LSC funding is more restrictive and more prescriptive. We have tried in the past to approach 2 or 3 different small companies (to form a course together) but it has never worked successfully: trying to find a location that was suitable, trying to get everybody free at the same time. And because you’ve got 3 different managers you haven’t got one overall buy in.

The vast majority of ‘Skills for Life’ courses were generic and were not tailored specifically to the workplace. In three sites, the courses were learndirect, so pre-programmed. In 26 cases the content of the learning was entirely decided by the provider. In the remaining 23, content was determined by combinations of the provider with management and/or unions; but the large majority reported that it was ‘mostly the provider who decided’ (Wolf et al, 2010). Of the 53 sites in our sample, only fourteen reported that some sort of ‘Occupational Needs Analysis’ or ‘Training Needs Analysis’ had been carried out. None of our respondents were clear about the difference between the two, but we infer from interview responses that in most cases, what took place was a TNA related to general literacy needs rather than occupation-specific ones.

In many cases, tutors were merely assigned to a workplace course by their manager and were given little or no guidance in the process of adapting their teaching to their workplace context. Several tutors (particularly those paid on a sessional basis) complained about the time and inconvenience involved in undertaking workplace provision and were therefore ill-equipped to develop courses that were effectively tailored to the workplace environment. Those tutors who sought to relate the course to the workplace context usually embarked on this process of contextualisation on the basis of their own initiative. For example, a tutor at

Manning Social Services encouraged the learners to fill in care plans on a computer. A tutor delivering a ‘literacy and customer care’ course at Milton bus company asked the learners to fill in incident report forms and sought to utilise the ‘Skills for Life’ Materials for Embedded Learning. Otherwise, the embedded materials that have been developed by the ‘Skills for Life’ strategy were not utilized in any of the sites selected for in-depth qualitative research, underlining the need for more effective dissemination of these resources to providers and workplaces.¹¹

Key Challenges to the Establishment of Sustainable ‘Skills for Life’ Provision (3): the Impact of the Recession and Economic Downturn.

The onset of the economic downturn has major implications for ‘Skills for Life’ workplace provision. Out of 55 sites involved in the ABSWL project, 8 sites had closed down altogether by May 2010 (6 as a result of the company falling into administration or being taken and 2 as a result of company rationalization). Research on the impact of previous recessions on training suggests that companies can respond to economic austerity in a variety of ways; from cutting back on spending on training to seeing the recession as an opportunity to devote more resources to training (Mason and Bishop, 2010, 37). Managers at FE colleges and training providers reported that it was becoming more difficult to run ‘Skills for Life’ courses within companies as a result of the economic downturn, since the difficulties of ensuring learners’ attendance and retention were exacerbated. For example, a tutor at a college in South East England mentioned:

We have noticed that companies are starting to become more and more reluctant to run these courses. People are working overtime so you don’t get good attendance. We usually get good attendance at the beginning of the course and then it drops off towards the end. This especially happens when they are working double shifts.

‘Skills for Life’ provision within public sector organisations involved in the ABSWL has also been negatively affected by re-structuring in response to economic austerity. One training

¹¹ ‘Skills for Life’ Materials for Embedded Learning have now been developed for a wide range of vocational areas. <http://rwp.excellencegateway.org.uk/embeddedlearning/index.cfm>

manager in a London local authority that had discontinued 'Skills for Life' provision explained the situation as follows:

There is less money available for training because of the economic situation- nearly all directorates are being restructured. We are working towards quite significant cutbacks. I would like to bring back the courses but I can't hold up hope that that will be the case. If there was a major need it might be different. Even the unions aren't coming at us and saying 'why aren't you doing more for these people'.'

As in the private sector, problems relating to the attendance and retention of learners are exacerbated in the current economic climate. As one hospital administrator explained: 'I have noticed that people are not so easily freed up for training. There is less time available for training and people can't be released so easily.'

Conclusion

The 'Skills for Life' national strategy has generated a complex 'ecology of learning' at policy level whereby unprecedented resources have been devoted to multiple and shifting funding channels. The byzantine and shifting funding landscape, with its concomitant bureaucracy and strong emphasis on credentialism has militated against long-term sustainability at organisational level.

Those organisations that have managed to sustain provision have generally succeeded in integrating 'Skills for Life' courses within a broader 'ecology of learning' whereby there is both support and formal recognition for such provision within the organisation as a whole. The development of literacy, numeracy and ESOL courses within these organisations approximates (rather than complies fully with) the 'whole organisation' approaches advocated by 'Skills for Life' development agencies. Although these recommendations represent an optimum strategy for developing the capacity of organisations to deliver 'Skills for Life' provision, the 'third-order' significance of learning within the workplace means that it is in practice difficult to establish sustainability in most organisations. As noted above, the pressure of adapting courses to shift patterns, the diverging priorities of providers, training managers and line managers, as well as changes to companies and the impact of the economic downturn have presented major barriers to sustainable provision.

The narrowly focussed economic agenda underpinning the ‘Skills for Life’ national strategy is at variance with the widely ranging motivations underpinning organisational and individual engagement with literacy provision. Government declarations of a ‘skills crisis’ based on assumptions about the existence of large-scale deficiencies in literacy and numeracy skills amongst lower-level employees have taken insufficient recognition of the variation of literacy practices amongst lower-level employees in differing organisational contexts as well as the complex constitution of employee skills and competencies, which frequently rely on ‘informal’ methods of learning in differing workplace settings.

We have suggested that Michel de Certeau’s work on quotidian social practices- and in particular his conceptual distinction between ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics’- provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the processes of adaptation and accommodation entailed in the implementation of this type of provision. Rather than explicitly subverting or rejecting dimensions of ‘Skills for Life’ provision, learners have ‘made of’ the opportunities afforded by these courses by using them with regard to ends and references that extend beyond the workplace and relate to their diverse and shifting life-styles in a manner that frequently compensates for previously negative educational experiences. In their bid to boost staff morale, foster a positive company ethos and enhance corporate solidarity, the majority of organisations have developed a broad ‘strategic’ terrain in which individuals have been able to deploy these ‘tactical’ engagements more extensively. Most of the institutions that have managed to sustain long-term provision have accorded official recognition to the value of learning for its own sake (for a variety of company-specific as well as altruistic considerations) and have therefore provided an institutional space for learners to pursue diverse interests and motivations in addition to addressing skills requirements in the workplace.

During the time-scale of our research, generous government funding has facilitated the capacity for workplace ‘Skills for Life’ provision to engage learners who have been failed by other forms of provision. In the current economic climate, it is likely that ‘Skills for Life’ provision in its reduced form will be more tailored specifically to the workplace and will entail shorter more flexible courses. Such courses are likely to be justified on the basis of being more cost-effective but may not be accompanied by the wider social benefits that have been associated with the high-tide of government funding for workplace ‘Skills for Life’ provision.

APPENDIX

Illustrative Case Study: Organisational Strategies and Individual Tactics in Coopers

Company Strategies:

Coopers is a large food manufacturer, employing 460 core staff and 120 agency staff, in the North East of England. The company has a large learning centre (consisting of 4 rooms equipped with computers) which was registered as a learndirect centre in 2004 and is open to members of the local community. The company pays the salary of a full-time tutor and assistant and provided the funds for the new building, while learndirect financed the computers and resources. The centre has offered ICT and 'Skills for Life' courses through learndirect as well as job-specific training.

The company has delivered 'Skills for Life' provision as part of a multifaceted learning strategy which is designed to boost staff morale and foster a learning culture that has positive benefits for the company in terms of increased corporate loyalty and 'readiness to change'. The human resources manager claims that 'the employees see the learning centre as their own' and 'it helps create that feel good factor.' The manager also perceives that there is a skills deficit amongst some employees which is particularly evident when they come together for company updates and group activities known as 'huddles'. The location of the learning centre- next to the perimeter fence of the company (with a door leading directly out to the street)- is indicative of company efforts to build ties with and foster a positive image in the local community (a former coal-mining area with high levels of unemployment).

The company's contract with learndirect was cancelled in 2007 following a scathing Ofsted report that found the centre 'inadequate' in all respects apart from 'equality of opportunity'. The publication of the report underlined the diverging priorities of company 'strategies' and the educational imperatives of learndirect as a national provider. Whereas Ofsted highlighted a low completion of qualifications and an insufficient number of qualified staff including the use of local young people who had been recruited to provide additional ICT tutorial support as part of their New Deal work experience, the company, on the other hand, felt that Ofsted had imposed too restrictive and college-centred criteria for inspection. Managers at Coopers justified the use of New Deal young people as a mutually beneficial arrangement in which disadvantaged young people had gained a much needed boost in confidence and self-esteem through the experience of passing on their knowledge of computers to older learners who were not so well versed in ICT. The learning centre ran informal courses without accreditation for the next two years before closing down altogether in 2009 as a result of cutbacks in the company's training budget.

'Skills for Life' provision in this organisation therefore relates to a broader company 'strategy' (in de Certeau's sense of the term) in which the company has delivered courses not only to promote skills development but also foster a positive company ethos, inculcate values that are conducive to the organisational goals and develop positive links with the local community. The deployment of this 'strategy' has entailed the reconfiguration of the spatial environment in a way that signifies the value accorded to learning in Coopers (epitomized in

the well equipped learning centre) as well as the fostering of links to the local community (represented by the location of the learning centre).

Individual Tactics:

Bill Williams

Bill Williams (b. 1961) has been working on the Coopers shop-floor for the last 25 years. Despite self-acknowledged problems with literacy, he feels his existing level of skills have not impeded him in the workplace since he can ‘muddle through. I only put flavour on crisps...they give you the flash title ‘seasoning technician’ but all I do is put a bit of dust on some slices that I fry on a table.’ He retains a critical stance towards several company initiatives, describing Personal Development Plans, for example, as a ‘gimmick’ and ‘a daft American idea’. Despite the aspirational ethos underpinning Coopers’ learning strategy, Bill is fully resigned to undertaking his current job until retirement. Bill’s main reason for undertaking a variety of Level 1 and Level 2 learndirect courses was that he was ‘just curious...I mean I left school with no qualifications to speak of, CSE things, which are probably in museums now.’ The courses have also facilitated Bill’s capacity to help his 7 year old child with his homework.

Bill Williams appreciated the opportunity to register at the learning centre and then undertake the bulk of learning on his computer at home: ‘I’m old fashioned, once I finish work I want to go home.. I take this home (i.e. the disk) and I’ll do this at home. I can look after the bairn as well. I just want to get out the premises- Finish work, home.’

Bill’s learning experiences do not therefore relate to the need to address literacy and numeracy skills deficiencies in the workplace (the underpinning rationale for the UK’s investment in workplace ‘Skills for Life’ provision) nor can his learning goals and motivations be reconciled in a straightforward way with the broader company learning ‘strategy’ since he remains staunchly independent of company efforts to foster corporate solidarity and highly critical of many company initiatives. Rather, Bill has ‘tactically’ appropriated and adapted the opportunities of the courses in order to pursue his interests outside work and facilitate his capacity to help his child’s homework.

Tracy Beaumont

Tracy Beaumont (b. 1968) left school with no qualifications. She undertook a range of ‘Skills for Life’ Learn Direct courses in response to self-acknowledged problems with literacy. Though she deals with graphs at work, she perceives that there is no use of maths in her job: ‘I just get the computer to add them up for us.’ The primary motivation for doing the course is ‘for her own benefit’ in order to boost her confidence: ‘at times I think I’m really numb (stupid).. but that’s the way I am.’

She attributes her low confidence to bad experiences at school which have also conditioned the nature of her learning as an adult:

I think that’s what puts me off going to college cos I would love to go to college but I think that’s what really puts me off...I don’t know I think, I just think well, school was that bad, it would be the same you know what I mean.

Tracy Beaumont’s confidence had been boosted slightly by the process of undertaking the course but she was still unable to fully escape the legacy of previous experiences of

humiliation at school and in the workplace. 'But I'm still not there you know what I mean just cos I've got it (i.e. the Literacy L2). I still haven't got the confidence.' She still feels that she struggles with reading, especially in public situations: 'it's like if you go in a meeting and you read things I panic, I panic, you know what I mean I'm really like conscious about it....because like, a lot of people take the mickey because you can't read, and now I'm really self conscious of it.'

Although Tracy's work objectives are more aligned with the company than those of Bill Williams (in so far as she employs a less critical stance towards company policies and procedures), her learning experiences cannot be reduced to, or understood solely within, the organisational context. She has 'made of' the opportunities afforded by 'Skills for Life' provision in order to address the deep-seated legacy of negative educational experiences and the outcomes of her learning have wide ramifications beyond the workplace.

Michelle Lewis

Michelle Lewis (b. 1962) has worked her way from the shop floor to being a 'front line manager' during her 25 years of employment at Coopers. The undertaking of Level 1 and Level 2 learndirect numeracy courses allowed her to overcome a potential lack of confidence in relation to her educational background:

I certainly felt more confident....I didn't go to college or university and like I say I'm a front line manager in there and a lot of the managers coming in have got degreesit just makes you feel a little bit better within the group.

The process of undertaking the numeracy course had also allowed her to engage more closely with her daughters' GCSE school work. Michelle, who left school at 16 with no qualifications, hopes that her learning as an adult will act as a positive example to her daughters: 'I'm trying to get that message across to them that things are a lot different now and you need to have your qualifications.' Out of the 3 learners highlighted in this case study, Michelle's work objectives may be regarded as being most closely aligned with the company agenda in so far as she is proud of her promotion to management- in keeping with the company's aspirational ethos- and is supportive of company policies and procedures. However, her experience of learning also entails a process of appropriation and adaptation- a 'making of' the learning opportunities- in so far as the course has allowed her to address specific personal concerns relating to her lack of confidence related to her low level of school qualifications.

Table 1: Most important expected and actual benefits from the course

Most important expected and actual benefits from the course

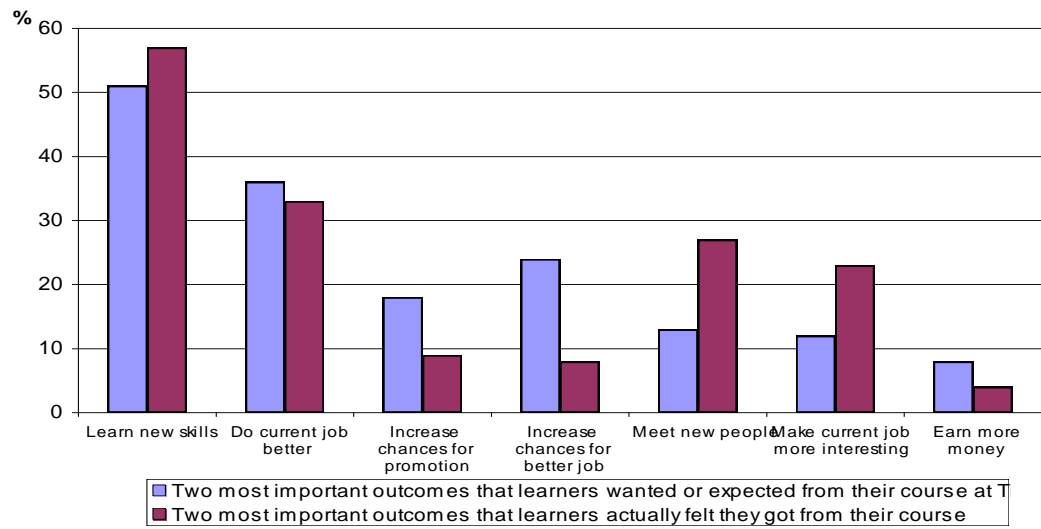


Table 2: Outcomes of course (item by item basis)

Outcomes of course (item by item basis)	
Increased confidence at work	66%
Developed new skills	61%
Increased confidence outside work	59%
Met new people	58%
Affected how current job is done*	45%
Helped with use of computers outside work	33%
Helped with use of computers at work	27%
Made work more interesting	25%
Increased chances for promotion	11%
Increased chances of a better job	10%
Helped earn more money	2%

* 40% elaborated: all reported positive impact

Whether or not a course increased confidence at work was highly (and positively) related to whether a learner also thought it had helped them to do their current job better/had affected how they did the job.

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