

Developing expertise: occupational versus job-based approaches in contemporary labour markets¹

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1. Introduction

The provision of an appropriate supply of occupational expertise is clearly of overwhelming importance in the contemporary labour market. Without it, how would the infrastructure that supports modern life be built, how would the sick and vulnerable be properly cared for; how would machinery and equipment be effectively maintained and repaired, and so on. All these activities are made possible because there are people available who have benefited from vocational education and training (VET), and have acquired the relevant occupational knowledge, skills and expertise that has enabled them to become competent practitioners.

However, there is a long tradition of scholars (such as John Dewey and Georg Kerschensteiner) who, historically, have argued that vocational learning has more than an instrumental function. They have argued for an holistic and humanistic concept of vocational education that recognises the inherent and intrinsic values for the individual, economy, and wider society associated with learning for occupational expertise and in the practice of skilled work. A contemporary scholar, Philipp Gonon, has summed up why this view is still relevant. He signals the continuing value of an approach to providing VET that transcends the requirements of particular employers and individuals, in order to fulfill broader economic and societal functions and interests.

“Vocational education that includes more than simply technical training is a model that successfully balances different interests” (Ganon 2009, 20).

In this chapter, I first consider different conceptions of VET and how these are linked to different approaches to developing occupational expertise. I then focus particularly on apprenticeship, discussing the strong historical relationship between apprenticeship and the concept of occupation. The discussion highlights the contested relevance of the concept in the context of contemporary labour markets by drawing on apprenticeship in England to

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highlight some of the weaknesses of a narrowly conceived, competence-based model.

Writing around a hundred years ago, the American philosopher John Dewey highlighted the importance of understanding the symbiotic relationship between the availability and character of vocational education and the economic and industrial context in which it is located (Dewey 2010). His insight is still highly relevant. Contemporary policy makers, employers, VET providers and researchers are all questioning the extent to which vocational education pathways should be expected to fulfill a range of objectives including: the preparation of young people for specific jobs with specific skills or, more broadly for a changing, dynamic and global labour market that requires adaptability for occupational and career changes; the production of active citizens able to participate fully in 21st century democracies; and, the ability to support and facilitate youth transitions from education to work and into adulthood in a period of economic hardship and intense global competition.

The purpose of VET can then be viewed on a spectrum with training for specific, narrowly defined jobs at one end and, at the other, a more general preparation designed to help young people lead productive and fulfilling adult lives as workers and citizens. Each has different implications for the development of occupational expertise, including the extent to which VET programmes are designed to include the teaching and learning of vocational knowledge and the relevant underpinning scientific, technical and social theories, or, instead, are organised in terms of a list of functional competences and standards that participants need to show they have met.

The recent international revival of interest in apprenticeship, and the development of national policies to support the evolution and expansion of programmes is symptomatic of renewed interest in the importance of occupational skill formation and the workplace as a learning environment (Fuller and Unwin 2012). Apprenticeship is a highly resilient concept that can be understood in two key ways. First, as an institution, it is the name for a set of formalised, state-regulated arrangements designed to produce skilled workers. In many European countries, these arrangements are organised through social partnerships between the State, employers, trades unions, and education and training providers; and that are created as programmes of learning and practical workplace training and experience targeted at young people. Second, apprenticeship can be understood metaphorically. In this regard, apprenticeship has meaning for people from a range of occupational fields. It has been used, since medieval times, as a term to describe the learning journey a person takes from novice to expert in a specific craft, trade or occupation. The term transcends occupational boundaries and hierarchies, and is used by surgeons as well as carpenters, chefs, actors and musicians to indicate how at they have developed their occupational expertise through practice over time, and that this has enabled them to reach the point where they can

work without supervision and be accepted as a full member of an occupational community. Lorna Unwin and I (Fuller & Unwin 2008, 12) have argued that “whilst the culture of workplaces and the nature of the relationship between young people and adults evolve, the broad conception of learning as becoming part of an occupational community remains at the heart of the apprenticeship model”.

Apprenticeship as a model of learning for occupational expertise and membership implies becoming a different person. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the point made so cogently by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), that learning involves the construction of identities, with knowing and membership of a community of practice entailing one another. Lave and Wenger’s concept of ‘communities of practice’ has been criticised for promoting an overly conservative picture of the reproduction of the same types of bounded expertise (what the medieval guilds referred to as their ‘secrets’) and expected behaviour from one generation of employees to the next within settings that remain stable. Critics have argued that the contemporary workplace is a much more unstable, dynamic and contested space (Hughes et al. 2007). Yet, Lave and Wenger’s concept has value because it draws attention to the symbiotic relationship between individuals and the development of their work and occupational identities, and the social relations and conditions in which this is nurtured.

2. Changing relationship between apprenticeship and occupation

Just as critics have argued that contemporary workplace communities of practice are dynamic and contested, there is a parallel argument that problematizes the ongoing stability and relevance of the concept of occupation. This has implications for apprenticeship, which I now want to explore through referring to the English case.² Historically, in England, apprenticeship was strongly aligned with the concept of skilled occupations. However in the late 1980s, competence-based qualifications were introduced in England. These were based on ‘standards’ that were maintained by the sectoral bodies. Since then the concept of sector has come to be used as a supply-side mechanism for the organisation of government-funded VET. In keeping with this shift, the introduction of government supported apprenticeship in the early to mid-1990s was based on a sectoral competence-based, rather than an

2 A longer version of this discussion can be found in Fuller, A. and Unwin, L. *Apprenticeship and the Concept of Occupation*, London: Gatsby Charitable Foundation.

occupational, model. This is expressed through the creation of apprenticeship as a 'wrapper' for a set of task-related competences located and assessed within sector frameworks, rather than being seen as a programme of learning leading to a recognisable occupational identity with clear labour market currency (Fuller & Unwin 2013).

Whilst in some English apprenticeships, for example in areas of engineering and construction, hairdressing, and parts of hospitality, the relationship of apprenticeship to occupations still has meaning due to the maintenance of a strong and long-standing apprenticeship culture, in others, for example, customer service, parts of retail, business administration, health and social care the connection is underdeveloped and even non-existent. This contrasts with the way apprenticeship is defined, designated and conceptualised in some other European countries and North America, and to some extent in Australia.

A useful way to approach the meaning of occupation is to consider the term 'job' which, in the UK, is sometimes used interchangeably with occupation. Linda Clarke (2011) has argued that the term 'job' has a much more limited meaning than occupation because it is connected to an employment contract in a workplace. Hence, a job description lists the tasks an individual is required to perform. In contrast, an 'occupation' is a 'much more general and all-encompassing term for employment' in which individuals are engaged and is *not* restricted to a particular employer or workplace. From Clarke's perspective, 'occupation' is aligned with the German concept of *Beruf* which is equated to the idea of vocation and is applicable across the socially constructed hierarchies of more and less prestigious occupations or professions.

In his classic text about the 'labour process under capitalism' published in the early 1970s, Harry Braverman (1974, 109) argued that up until Frederick Winslow Taylor developed his scientific management techniques in the late 19th century, 'the craft or skilled trade was the basic unit, the elementary cell of the labour process.' For Braverman, occupations became deskilled or, in the case of crafts, wiped out as a result of Taylor's efficiency revolution and the removal of the opportunity for workers to conceptualise and have discretion over their own work tasks. Like Braverman, but writing much more recently, Richard Sennett (2008) has argued that Tayloristic or Fordist forms of labour process severely restrict opportunities for people to develop and deploy their occupational expertise.

The concept of occupation is central, then, to understandings of how labour markets are organised as well as to the interlinked development of identity and expertise, occupational identity should not be seen as a static concept, but one that is dynamic and multi-faceted. Individuals construct and have their occupational identities shaped within a) changing institutional and

cultural contexts; b) the social relations of particular workplace learning environments, and c) changing labour market conditions and hierarchies.

The development of an occupational identity (the process of ‘becoming’) takes time and commitment and, hence, the process of maturation has always been seen as central to apprenticeship. In his discussion of the development of occupational self-concept and commitment to an occupation by apprentices in printing, R.A. Flude (1977) talked about the concept of ‘anticipatory socialisation’ – the notion that as an individual progresses through their training, they become more likely to identify themselves as a full member of their occupational group. Back in the 1970s, Flude was arguing that apprentices were not just training for a job role, but to have the status of full members of an occupational community. However, as Braverman’s analysis has highlighted, industrial and technological innovation in the post-second world war era undermined the demand for and availability of traditional occupations and skilled trades.

By the 1990s writers such as Robert Reich³ (1991) and Catherine Casey (1995) were conceiving advanced industrial liberal economies such as the UK and the US as post-occupational. The implications of this for occupational identity and the development of occupational expertise, as well as for the character of labour markets, were significant. Expectations for many people were shifting away from the notion of training for life-long employment in a secure and stable occupation to a recognition, either that it would be necessary to move between jobs as their original skills became obsolete, or that the range of skills required to achieve occupational expertise would have to alter. Reich argued that in the context of rapid industrial change and globalisation, a radical re-categorisation of work was needed, which did not depend on defined occupations as its basis.

Building on his analysis of the US economy, Reich (1991) argued that three over-arching work roles were emerging. They were ‘routine production services’, ‘in-person services’ and ‘symbolic-analytic services’ which offered broad concepts of work activity that were decoupled from the notion of specific occupation. Routine production services referred to jobs in mass production enterprises, whilst in-person services referred to routine interpersonal or customer-facing roles. The final category, ‘symbolic analytic services’, referred to ‘problem-solving, problem identifying, and strategic brokering activities’ and as including all those who ‘solve, identify and broker problems by manipulating symbols’. According to Reich it was only the last category, the symbolic analysts, comprising about 20 per cent of the American workforce in the early 1990s, which he saw as having an increasingly strong position in contemporary international labour markets based on their ability to add value to an enterprise through the creative use of knowledge, skills and

3 Robert Reich was Secretary of Labor under President Bill Clinton from 1993 to 1997.

experience. In contrast with the past, increasing the number of ‘symbolic analysts’ would require the expansion of higher education (rather than intermediate vocational education, including apprenticeship) as the vehicle for creating the level of attainment and generic skills that could enable the workforces in countries like the US to compete in the new order of the ‘global knowledge economy’.

However, whilst it is true that, in recent years, higher education has expanded significantly in the United States and many other countries this has not always been coupled with a diminution of interest in VET and the development of intermediate skills. In particular, and as I have highlighted, there has been a revival of international interest in growing the apprenticeship route. I think it is important, then, to recognise the relationship between industrial and technological change, the nature of occupational expertise, and the structure and character of labour markets, and how these vary across countries with different institutional and cultural VET histories.

For example, in Germany the holistic notion of *Beruf* continues to underpin its VET system and, crucially, this is supported through regulated occupational labour markets. In the German context, the development of occupational identity and expertise continues to be reinforced through standardised apprenticeship training ordinances as well as by the legal definition and protections of skilled occupations. This regulated and standardised institutional model of apprenticeship promotes a collective approach to skill formation, a commitment to occupation as distinct from, although it can be in addition to, the commitment an individual may feel to their employing organisation. It also plays an important role in developing citizenship. Despite the ongoing strengths of this approach, questions are asked about the ability of the model to adapt in response to industrial, commercial and technological change, and competition from across the global economy and labour markets. With this backdrop in mind, young people and their families have to consider what the best education and training strategy may be for securing future labour market position and well-being. Whilst the dual system remains strong in countries such as Germany, interest in participation in higher education has increased, with new progression routes opening up (Deissinger, Aff, Fuller & Jorgensen 2013).

In countries such as England that have labour markets which are more flexible, the institutional supports and arrangements for the development of occupational expertise, identity and commitment are quite weak. Importantly, there is limited occupational regulation or use of licence to practise provisions and this restricts the benefits (eg wage premium) that can accrue to the completion of an apprenticeship. Individuals are increasingly expected to change jobs throughout their working lives, with career progression tending to be linked to internal, rather than external occupational, labour market arrangements. This produces a model of commitment that privileges the rela-

tionship between individual and employer rather than between individual and the occupation, and militates against collective institutional approaches to skill formation.

Earlier in this chapter, I described apprenticeship as a model of learning for occupational expertise which takes the apprentice on a journey to becoming a full member of an occupational community. This assumes, firstly, that there is a defined occupational community to join; and, secondly, that apprenticeship is a recognised and formalised route to achieving the relevant occupational expertise required to join the community. What follows from this is that each occupation has a defined knowledge-base and associated curriculum which has to be completed and examined in order for the apprentice to show that they meet the requirements to practise as a recognised member of the community. As a result, the apprentice has, at the outset, a clear sense of the occupation they are aiming for. They know that if they meet the requirements they will gain the necessary certification for employment in that occupation.

However, the government-supported apprenticeship programme in England has not been underpinned by a strong model of learning and concept of occupation. Instead, it is underpinned by the perceived needs of employers in a highly flexible labour market in which typically people can be easily switched between job roles within very broadly defined sectoral categories. In addition, manufacturing and engineering, areas strongly associated with skilled technical work, well-defined education and training pathways and a strong concept of occupation, currently only accounts for about 10 per cent of the UK economy. Only about 3 per cent of those becoming an apprentice in England are starting an engineering apprenticeship.

3. Apprenticeship as a job rather than an occupation: the English case

Government supported apprenticeship in England is conceived first and foremost as a job. This is in stark contrast to an occupationally-based approach, which has at its heart the concept of participation in a staged ‘journey’ towards recognised occupational expertise. An important illustration of the difference is that apprenticeships in England are offered at different qualification and skill levels ranging from semi-skilled to bachelor degree level. This fragmented approach sets it apart from other countries where apprenticeships are only available for occupations which have been formally recognised as ‘skilled’, and where there is one integrated apprenticeship per defined occupation. The most recent statistics for 2014-15 (House of Commons Library, January 2016) indicate that 60 per cent of apprenticeships undertak-

en in England are only at Level 2 – the semi-skilled level and are linked to job titles such as ‘warehouse assistant’, shop assistant, and ‘food production’.

The English system implies that novices have to complete more than one apprenticeship to climb the relevant ladder of occupational expertise, but there is no guarantee that the next level of apprenticeship will be available. This means that people can get ‘stuck’ and fail to complete their journey. So, if say a 17 year old pursues a Level 2 (semi-skilled) apprenticeship usually completing in about 12 months, they may not be able to progress to a Level 3 apprenticeship and attain skilled status. Their progression will depend on whether their employer can offer them a job which requires Level 3 skills. Without such a job being available, they will not be able to produce evidence that they have undertaken, and been assessed as competent in, the relevant tasks. Moreover, on the basis of their Level 2 apprenticeship alone, they are less likely to have developed the necessary general education attainment to enable them to progress easily in their educational career either. Whilst, apprentices are required to pursue English and mathematics as part of their apprenticeship, they only have to study the subjects at a level below the apprenticeship itself. For example, those completing a Level 2 programme are required to attain English and mathematics at Level 1 and pursue (but not qualify in) the subjects at Level 2 during the course of their apprenticeship.

The fragmented and narrow approach to apprenticeship is a weakness in the English model. However, this does not mean that there are no high quality apprenticeships in England. Where the scheme has been grafted on to an occupation with a strong training history and culture, for example in some forms of engineering, there are examples of superb practice and what Lorna Unwin and I have called ‘expansive apprenticeships’ (2003). However, the overall picture is one of a weak relationship between occupation and apprenticeship and a minimalist approach to the inclusion of general education.

There are currently nearly 200 apprenticeship frameworks in England covering around 1,700 job titles and job roles. The five most highly populated apprenticeship sector frameworks are Health and Social Care, Business Administration, Management, Hospitality and Catering, and Customer Service – all in service areas. The minimum length for a government-funded apprenticeship is 12 months. In response to criticisms about the quality of apprenticeship in England, the Conservative government has initiated a further process of reform. This involves small groups of employers (known as ‘Trailblazers’) coming together to devise and determine a single standard for each apprenticeship.⁴ Approved trailblazer standards become eligible for government funding.

A focus on one of the new apprenticeship standards helps to show that the English reforms do not involve moving the model away from a job-based to

4 Further information about this approach is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/apprenticeship-standards>.

an occupationally-based approach. To illustrate this, we can look at one of the Trailblazer standards that has recently been given approval for public funding and delivery as an apprenticeship: as a ‘Golf Greenkeeper’. The description of the role states:

A Golf Greenkeeper is responsible for the maintenance, care and overall appearance of a golf course in line with employer’s requirements. It is their job to maintain a good quality playing surface and ensure the course offers a consistent challenge and an enjoyable experience for golfers.⁵

The standard is pitched at Level 2 – positioning this job at a semi-skilled level with apprentices only required to achieve Level 1⁶ in English and Mathematics (the general education component of the standard). This means that even those successfully completing the apprenticeship would only have achieved a level in English and Mathematics expected of 14 year olds. Another interesting issue to note is the degree of specialisation associated with this standard, which illustrates that this apprenticeship is not underpinned by a strong concept of occupation. A more holistic conception would have focused on the development of knowledge and skills associated with becoming a broader based expert, qualified to maintain grounds across a range of sports and leisure activities including say football, rugby, cricket, bowls, as well as golf. Limiting the role to golf green keeping signals a level of specificity likely to generate a narrow occupational identity, restrict the apprentice’s access to vocational knowledge concepts and principles relevant to understanding the properties of diverse natural and artificial playing surfaces and types of ground; limit the apprentice’s subsequent employment opportunities, and opportunities for educational progression.

The fragmented and segmented character of the English model is retained under the Trailblazer reforms. As the example of the golf greenkeeper illustrates there is no concept of an integrated journey of skill formation leading to recognition as a skilled practitioner in a broad occupational field. Rather than having one standard covering the whole trajectory from novice to expert, the individual must navigate their way along a difficult and obscure path. The completion of the Level 2 Golf green keeper apprenticeship only takes them part of the way on that journey and, although a Level 3 apprenticeship exists, they are not guaranteed access to this next rung of the skill ladder – known as ‘Advanced Golf Greenkeeper’ apprenticeship:

The apprenticeship is designed to provide the greenkeeper with the skills and knowledge to operate at an advanced level where supervisory and/or

5 See https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/372241/GOLF_GREENKEEPING_HORTICULTURE_Golf_Greenkeeper.ashx.pdf accessed 29 January 2016.

6 Level 1 is the standard expected by age 14, with Level 2 by age 16.

specialist technical and agronomic skills are required. Upon completion the advanced greenkeeper will have the necessary skills to supervise the greenkeeping team and the maintenance of the golf course, in the absence of the Head Greenkeeper/Golf Course Manager, and will assist in the planning, supervising and implementing the maintenance, care and overall appearance of a golf course in line with the employer's requirements.⁷

The advanced standard outlined above is highlighted in terms of two dimensions, 'technical agronomic skills' and supervisory and management responsibilities. Completion of this standard is associated with skilled level work, with the individual being able to practise autonomously as well as overseeing the work of others in the team. However, it is still narrowly defined in terms of 'golf greenkeeping' and associated jobs ('Senior Greenkeeper, First Assistant Golf Greenkeeper, Deputy Golf Course Manager') rather than in more holistic occupational terms. From the perspective of general educational attainment the standard is associated with the achievement of Level 2 in English and Mathematics (the standard normally expected of 16 year olds).

The example of the two apprenticeships in golf greenkeeping illustrate some of the key issues associated with the government's approach to apprenticeship, which set it apart from the well-known dual system model operated (with some variation) in countries such as Switzerland, Germany and Denmark. I draw out three critical messages from the English case. First and fundamentally, the relationship between apprenticeship and occupation is weak; the notion that apprenticeship is a job consisting of task-based competences is the structuring principle. Second, the model does not position apprenticeship as a vehicle for developing a skilled (defined as a minimum as Level 3) level of occupational expertise. Most English apprenticeships are associated with semi-skilled jobs and are available at Level 2. Third, and this is a longstanding criticism of English VET, apprenticeship incorporates a very restricted general education component. It is limited both in terms of educational level (Level 1 or 2) and breadth (only English and Mathematics). This means that apprenticeship generally does not provide young people with a strong platform for educational progression. Even in the advanced standard outlined above, the apprentice is not required to go beyond the level they may have achieved at age 16 (i.e. that they may already have on entry to, or soon after entering the apprenticeship). Whilst it is important to remember and stress that there are examples of extremely high quality apprenticeship available in England, the shortcomings in *the system* allow weak provision to continue.

7 See https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/455065/GOLF_GREENKEEPING_Advanced_Golf_Greenkeeper.pdf accessed 29 January 2016.

4. Conclusion

I began this chapter by contrasting a far-reaching, holistic conception of vocational education with a narrow occupationally specific alternative, indicating the range of purposes it may be required to fulfill. The ensuing analysis has indicated some of the important dimensions along which approaches to VET and apprenticeship can be differentiated and some of the implications for social justice and inclusion, as well as for educational and career progression.

Case study research is important here as it provides an effective way of identifying and explaining the diverse characteristics of different approaches to VET. Evidence can be generated that shows, on the one hand, how approaches to VET reflect deep-seated historical, cultural, economic, and institutional differences between societies and, on the other, how external pressures and economic forces (e.g. related to the negative economic effects of the banking crisis, changing industrial structure and patterns of international labour mobility, and technological innovation) provide a transformed context with which all industrialized countries are grappling.

Young people are particularly vulnerable to unemployment and to experiencing barriers to their successful transition to fulfilled adult lives and citizenship. The extant literature suggests that the availability of good quality vocational education and apprenticeships can facilitate transitions, but contextual factors mean that what counts as effective, for whom, and in whose interests, is likely to continue to differ.

Finally, I have argued that there are key issues for VET to address in support of developing occupational expertise. In particular I have drawn attention to issues of and tensions between occupational stability versus occupational change; holistic versus narrower approaches to VET and the opportunity to progress life-chances that VET can provide for young people.

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