Tacit Skills and Work Re-entry: entering new workplaces through retraining

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the primary findings from the project ‘Recognition of Tacit Skills and Knowledge in Work Re-entry’, carried out as part of the UK Economic and Social Research Council funded Research Network ‘Improving Incentives to Learning in the Workplace’. Data have been analysed using the Dynamic Concept Analysis (DCA) method. DCA assists in the analysis of data using conceptual models based on information about concept relations in adult learning. Modelling of learning processes for adults with interrupted occupational and learning careers can identify ways in which recognition and deployment of tacit skills enhances learning experiences and outcomes as learners move between college and workplace settings.

Introduction

The significance of the recognition of adults’ prior experiences and tacit skills, as they move between various learning or workplace environments, has been one of the central focuses of this project. Research has shown that various aspects of employees’/unemployed people’s individual biographies as well as their prior experiences play an important part in facilitating or undermining their learning success within various kinds of learning or workplace environments. Building on Molander (1992), Eraut (1999) and Evans’ previous EU-funded work (1998–2000)\textsuperscript{ii}, the project draws on the hypothesis that, for those with interrupted work histories, tacit forms of personal competences are frequently under-recognised and under-utilised in work re-entry. Learners have different life experiences, such as occupational, educational, family experiences, etc. Thus, their individual experiences and personal skills as well as their dispositions and attitudes often make their methods and approaches to job tasks unique, however, often not recognised, within their workplace environments. However, we argue that certain conditions and circumstances potentially may contribute to the recognition and self-recognition of these skills and facilitate the process of work re-entry. In this paper we argue that it is important to understand better how tacit forms of personal competences can contribute to sustaining learning outcomes in different types of learning environments. Evidence from our empirical work shows that retraining as a type of learning environment may play an important role in this context.

The contributions of prior experiences: the significance of tacit skills within retraining

Our research indicates that people may acquire a number of personal skills through various configurations of their prior life experiences, for example, through travel, home and family
settings, engaging in volunteer activities and overcoming various setbacks in life. Our interview and fieldwork data enabled us to elicit a wide range of tacit skills that take/may take an important place in the context of ‘from learning to work’ transitions of adults. The data indicate that adults who have learned a number of valuable skills from their prior experiences (either personal, professional or educational) are able to transfer them into learning or workplace environments, often without recognising the importance or value of such skills for their learning outcomes, learning success and work re-entry. We classified the skills into six categories: (1) competences related to values and attitudes; (2) social and co-operative competences; (3) methodological competences; (4) practical and content-related competences; (5) learning competences and (6) strategic (or self-steering) competences (for more discussion see Evans et al, 2004).

Aspects of learners’ individual biographies manifest themselves through different skills acquired from their previous experiences. Adult learners who undertake various courses in order to facilitate their ‘job hunting’ and work re-entry often start their training equipped with a number of skills they acquired during ‘their career/learning interruptions’, as a result of outside-of-work/learning experiences. The interviews have shown that they often use and deploy such skills in their new learning environments, either with or without the support of their peers and tutors. Family context, including managing households and looking after children, has been identified as important in terms of acquiring a number of useful skills that can be transferred to and/or successfully deployed within both educational and workplace environments.

Such ‘soft skills’ often have strong tacit dimensions, and, in many cases, adults do not recognise them as valuable and ‘presentable’ in the job market. Our research also draws on substantial gender differences in the context of self-recognition/non-recognition of tacit skills and competences by adults who experience career/learning interruptions at some points of their lives. Women tend, to a certain extent, to recognise/partially recognise skills they have developed as a result of outside-of-job experiences, such as managing their households or looking after children. However, they do not feel that, at the present time, these skills are appreciated or recognised in the job market. Conversely, our male respondents, in most cases, do not value such skills at all, unless some exceptional circumstances have an effect on their perception of these skills as being ‘relatively useful’. In the case of Ali, for example, he has been looking after his son since the baby was born. Ali’s wife has been carrying on with
her job as an accountant working in a big superstore. Although Ali admits that he has acquired a number of important skills while looking after his son and managing the household, he doubts if prospective employers would ever count such an experience as ‘valuable’.

Because such skills and competences have a very strong tacit dimension, it is proving to be very challenging to demonstrate and present such skills to others. The project’s data suggest that retraining as a kind of learning environment may actually help the learners to recognise the importance of their prior experiences through making their tacit skills and personal competences visible through employing these skills in a wide range of various educational and social activities. Tutors may employ a number of methods and approaches to help the learners to make their skills visible. Team work, one-to-one tutorial help and encouraging learners to help their fellow-learners have been identified as the methods that may help to uncover tacit skills.

The case of Maria, for example, shows that she acquired a number of important skills and competences though running her household. This is how she describes what she learnt from her family experience:

> I'm very flexible, I'm on time, I'm good at timekeeping, I listen to people and understand […]. I forgot to mention [my ability to cope with various situations]. That's coping because when you keep indoors, you have to learn to cope with all sorts of issues, yes.

Starting a course in the college of further education and participating in a number of classroom activities initiated by her tutor, made her realise how important these skills are. Maria claimed that she was able not only to deploy her personal skills but also to develop them further within her learning environment:

> I've learned [how to cope with various situations in the college environment] as well, and I know I'm stronger in that, more than before [when I stayed at home]. It's, for example [in the college], we […] got little time to do so [much], and at home, I do the same thing, but now I know I can also do more than I used to do before.

The ability to listen is another valuable skill that Maria was able to transfer from her family context to the college environment. She also stresses that her ability to listen helped in
developing her capacity to express herself on paper, thus contributing to both her writing and communication skills:

[...] Listening to people and understanding and probing on paper that what you are being told is clearly written on paper so somebody else will understand.

Management and planning skills have also been described as important transferable skills, valuable in both household and learning/workplace environments. The interview with Bev indicates that she considers her family experience to be important in developing such skills:

Q While staying at home, do you think that you developed any new skills?
B Running my household. Management.
Q [...] how did you develop these skills?
B Because money is tight, not working, we've got a very limited amount of money coming in, so you've got to manage it well.

Bev hoped to get a job with London Underground. She participated in the London Underground (LU) pre-recruitment training programme offered by a college of further education. The course helped her to understand to what extent the personal skills that she developed from her household experience, such as communication and team work skills, could be particularly useful for someone working for LU:

For this course, and the job, you'll be working, you'll be seeing to the public really, you need communication skills, you need team working experience; these days we find the London Underground [has] lots of hazards, so they try to improve the safety hazards so you have to be health and safety conscious. What else do you need? Obviously [...] customer services skills.

Being in a learning environment in the college of further education has also enabled her to develop such skills further. Interacting with other members of her course, especially in team work, facilitated her communication and team work skills:

[...] because we talk amongst ourselves and we help each other, you know, where I'm lacking I speak to someone and they help me, where somebody's lacking they speak to me and I help them.

The fact that her application to LU was successful developed her confidence in her personal skills and contributed to her further career and personal development.

The interviews with other respondents have also indicated that various training and retraining courses have a great potential for facilitating learners’ awareness of their tacit skills acquired
from their previous experiences. What is more, such courses may actually contribute to further development and acquisition of a number of skills and competences, thus facilitating the process of work re-entry for those with career interruptions.

**Recognition of tacit skills: facilitating the deployment of ‘hidden capabilities’**

The degree to which adults are able and willing to use their tacit skills through learning or workplace environments varies from learner to learner. While some learners find it easy to deploy their personal skills, others need a lot of encouragement and support from their tutors, employers or colleagues in order to start deploying their personal skills in a new environment. We found that lack of confidence leading to low levels of involvement and skills deployment has been experienced by adults with substantial career interruptions that occurred, e.g. because of family circumstances or forced unemployment. As described above, our fieldwork has revealed that adults with interrupted occupational and learning biographies often gain a number of valuable skills from other types of experiences. However, because of lack of confidence and low self-recognition of their skills, they often do not value such competences and, as a consequence, they do not feel motivated to use them in their new learning environments. Our research indicates that the college training/retraining programme is a type of learning environment that may either stimulate (positive environment) or further discourage (negative environment) the learners.

Our findings suggest that the positive learning environment that encourages the learners to use their ‘hidden skills’ is associated with the ‘culture of recognition of these skills’ by tutors and learners themselves. The interviews with learners indicate that if the learners believe that their skills are recognised or valued by others they feel stimulated to apply these skills in everyday learning activities.

The issue of recognition of tacit skills and competences has two facets: recognition by learners themselves and recognition by others (tutors, fellow-learners, colleagues, families, etc). In this paper we refer to the former as self-recognition. Our case studies undertaken within the fieldwork show that there are visible links and interrelationships between the recognition of skills and a number of positive factors such as learners’ involvement, social interaction and positive learning outcomes. The case studies have been analysed with the
assistance of the DCA computer program that allows for graphical modelling of these interrelations. Janet’s case (see Case 1), demonstrates the way that recognition and self-recognition of tacit skills facilitates her learning attitudes, skills deployment, involvement, as well as high level of confidence. The interviews with both Janet and her tutor revealed that recognition and self-recognition of her skills were central to her learning success, which ultimately facilitated her work re-entry. Conversely, the case of Mick (see Case 2) demonstrates that low skills recognition and self-recognition contribute to his lower involvement and confidence and discourage him from deploying his tacit skills acquired from previous experiences.

Case 1: Janet’s case (see Model 1).

Background

At the time of the initial interview Janet undertook a course ‘Certificate for Women Management’ in a college of further education in 2002. Her previous work experience was mainly in administration. She also undertook a teacher training course in Information Technology in the same year. She completed both courses in 2003 and obtained a position of an administrative officer in the Home Office Department.

Learner (1a, 2a, 3a, 4a).

Janet’s involvement is high (1a) and this is stimulated by the expansive workplace environment (9a). Her interaction is active (4a), and she herself perceives it to be one of the most valuable skills acquired in the college and transferred to the workplace. She stresses that that her ‘teamwork skills’ help her to do her job well. As the model indicates, her high confidence (2a) facilitates other concepts (e.g. 1a, 2a, 3a, 8a). She feels that her personal confidence and skills are being fully utilised in her work environment.

Skills deployment and recognition (5a, 6a, 7a).

Janet feels that her personal skills such as prioritising, communication and teamwork skills are being fully recognised and deployed and recognised in her workplace environment (5a, 6a). Her employers recognise her skills and this leads to her higher involvement (6a, 1a) as she is given more responsibilities.
Model 1: Janet’s Case

Workplace/Learning environment (8a, 9a).

Janet is experiencing her workplace environment as expansive, which is especially stimulated by her involvement (1a), recognition of her skills by her employers (6a) and opportunities to deploy her skills (5a). She also stresses that her employers give her a learning opportunity by providing opportunities for further training. Recognition of her skills by her employers also leads to self-recognition of her own skills and competences (6a, 7a). Skills recognition and deployment is facilitated by her positive learning attitudes and expansive workplace environment (3a, 9a).

Outcomes (10a).

Janet’s learning outcomes are positive (10a). Her high involvement (1a), high confidence (2a), positive skills deployment (5a) and recognition (6a) facilitated her positive learning outcomes. She also stresses that her active social interaction (8a) facilitated her informal learning outcomes.
Model 2: Mick’s Case.

Case 2: Mick’s case (see Model2)

Background

Mick’s previous work experience was mainly in administration. He came to England from another country several years ago. Since then his learning experiences have included undertaking various courses in colleges of adult education. At the time of the initial interview he was participating in a ‘London Underground pre-employment’ Training Programme offered by one of the colleges of further education. Mick was not successful with the interview and did not get a job. Eleven months after completing this programme he is still unemployed and looking for a job. He feels that this process is more difficult for him because of his age (57).

Learner (1b, 2n, 3n, 4n).

His involvement is low (1b) as he maintains that, while staying at home, he does not have any opportunities to get involved in any learning activities. His low self-recognition of his own skills (7b) also prevents him from taking part in any community or voluntary activities while he is looking for a job. Mick also claims that his skills are not recognised (6b) by others (e.g. prospective employers, tutors), which also contributes to the process of low involvement. His confidence is medium (2n) so far but he claims that his futile efforts to find a job may decrease his confidence to a very low level.
Skills deployment and recognition (5n, 6b, 7b).

Mick’s self-recognition of his own skills is low (7b), mainly due to the problem of low recognition (6b) of his previously acquired skills by others, especially by prospective employers. Interview data also indicates that he does not utilise fully his existing skills (5n) because of low skills self-recognition (7b). From what he said about his past experiences it seemed that he had acquired a number of valuable skills from his previous experiences in administration.

Learning environment (8n)

In general, he thought that the learning environment in the college where he took his course was not very stimulating (8n). Mick claims that due to the fact that the course was very short and specifically targeted for the London Underground application process, he was not able to fully utilise his skills (5n).

Outcomes (10n)

The fact that he failed his interview with London Underground at the end of his course had a considerable negative effect on his levels of confidence, self-assurance and self-esteem, which are considered to be informal outcomes within the context of our study (10n). The model indicates that among other things, his medium learning outcomes contributes to reducing his confidence (2n), low involvement (1b) and low skills self-recognition (7b).

Deployment of people’s ‘hidden capabilities’ in the workplace

The research indicates the importance of employees’ prior experiences and their deployment of tacit skills in the workplace. Learners who experienced their college training as positive, in terms of recognition and deployment of their tacit skills, found it easier to transfer their personal competences into their new workplace environments. The process of skills’ deployment and development in the workplace often depends on the kind of workplace environment. Our key findings suggest that new employees may experience their workplace environments as expansive (stimulating, positive, facilitating skills deployment and acquisition) or restrictive (non-stimulating or dull). An expansive workplace is associated with a number of positive factors such as opportunities for on-the-job training and skills acquisition, opportunities for career development and recognition of employees’ skills by their supervisors. As is the case with the college environments, the recognition of employees’ tacit skills and prior experiences by others (e.g. manager, supervisors or colleagues), seems to be one of the most significant factors affecting employees’ perceptions of their workplaces.
Our interviews with employers have shown that although they see soft skills as important, these are often disregarded when they have been gained in household settings. In college settings, the tutors often employ different methods and approaches to uncover learners’ tacit skills and abilities. Within the workplace, it is often an employee’s own responsibility to make his/her skills visible to others, though recognition of tacit skills by managers and supervisors could actually stimulate this process. What is also considered to be important in this context is whether the workplace settings provide sufficient opportunities to encourage an employee (especially a new employee) to deploy and demonstrate his/her skills at the workplace.

The research indicates that individuals are able to both contribute to and learn from their workplace environments. Adults are contributing to their continuous workplace development by utilising and deploying their skills, which may be tacit. At the same time, various aspects of the workplace environment are affecting individual employees, often contributing to their own progress and maturity. Such interactions between employees on the one hand, and the workplace on the other, lead to a set-up whereby an individual employee becomes an essential part of the workplace environment. Even if employees are not particularly active within their workplaces they cannot avoid being influenced by various workplace interactions and activities, for example:

**The importance of prior experiences at the workplace**

Our findings suggest that employees’ prior experiences, dispositions as well as cultural backgrounds may actually influence or even shape and modify their workplace environments (Hodkinson et al, 2004). By deploying skills that were acquired from their previous (or current outside-of-work) experiences, individuals can contribute to ‘shaping’ the culture of their workplace and learning environments. A number of our respondents who have recently entered new workplaces, admitted that some of the skills and approaches they are using in their new jobs are similar to those they had been using in their prior experiences (e.g. educational, family or workplace).

As noted by one employee, Diana, the fact that she is able to use her personal skills and abilities at her workplace helps her, to a certain extent, to personalise her workplace.
environment and realise herself as an active member or a part of this environment. She is very active and independent in her workplace environment, taking her own initiative in a number of activities. She stresses that her previous background, both educational and family, has facilitated her current success at her workplace. The importance of utilising personal skills and abilities at a workplace has also been stressed in the interview with Maria, who works as a mid-day supervisor in a primary school. Her own family experience enabled her to develop a number of valuable skills that she is using successfully in her work. She describes the skills that she employs as:

[...] normal skills, what every mother has. Patience with children, trying to understand them.

While deploying her skills at her workplace she is trying to shape an environment for children that she describes as ‘home-like’, similar to that which she is creating for her own children at home. She maintains that her own biography and life experiences as a mother help her to be aware of the possible challenges of her job as well as to better understand the needs and attitudes of children depending on their age group:

Sometimes [my job] is challenging because children are 5 years old. Sometimes they want to go home; they’re crying because they want to go to their parents. You have to use your skills for comforting them and quieting them down. And when children are older, sometimes they challenge you [...]. You have to use different skills, sometimes, to be both stern and fair.

While doing her job she is seeking to acquire and develop new skills that would enable her to provide better care for children. Such a positive attitude towards her work has encouraged her to undertake further training offered by her employer. She undertook First Aid training, which she considers to be of utmost importance for someone who is looking after small children:

[...] when children are hurt, like, scratch their knee, scratch their elbow, are feeling sick or are actually [not well] ...I am able to help them.

Her disposition and positive attitude towards further learning as well opportunities to make use of her previous skills help her to realise herself as an essential part of this environment.
The case of Mary demonstrates the way she was able to transfer her skills and competences acquired as a result of her college training to her workplace. Prior to taking the course Certificate for Women in Management offered by a college of further education, Mary worked as a Deputy Team Leader in a Mental Health Group. She was happy with her position and considered herself to be a part of the company. However, taking the course in management made her realise her full potential as a prospective leader. She maintains that she acquired a lot of skills both personal and professional while undertaking this course, especially

[...] planning; one thing that I found useful was the strategic charts, strategic planning, so you would look at the goal, short-term goals, long-term goals, you look at who it will benefit, you look at who you need to target in order to carry out that goal. That helped me. It helps me stay focused, planning, also reviewing and evaluating. Lots of things came up on the course that make sense to me in the job I’m doing [...] when you’re working you actually set yourself to review what you are doing at a certain period and then you evaluate whether you achieved what you set out to do.

The course also helped her to develop her so-called soft outcomes such as those associated with increased self-assurance and greater confidence and this facilitated further her skills in social interaction, teamwork and management:

It’s just kind of given me the confidence I think; for years I felt I could do this and this is why I did the course, because I felt for years that I could this but was always kind of cautious about, well I haven’t had any formal training, even though I was in the job doing it for years, but the training itself gave me the confidence.

Transferring the newly acquired skills into her workplace facilitated her career as Mary was promoted to the position of Team Leader. Mary’s case stresses the significance of outside-of-workplace experiences and their impact on an individual’s career and skills development within the workplace. Outside-of-job life as well as aspects of individual biographies may influence employees’ success and development at their workplaces.

The interviews conducted within this project indicate that employees may often use their personal or tacit skills while they are trying to become accustomed to or adjust to their new workplaces. The case of Nick demonstrates how he uses his tacit skills such as politeness, patience and affability in order to conform to the basic workplace rules, regulations and general settings. He works as a sales assistant in a big furniture shop, and his duties, among others, include dealing with the customers and, as he describes it, ‘making them feel quite
comfortable’. He maintains that in order to do his job well and be a part of the workplace environment he has to employ a number of personal skills that one would need for customer care. He is positive that the skills that are useful for this type of work are personal and can’t be ‘just acquired’ from regular on-the-job training:

[…] but in the nature of that job you don’t need any particular training, just basically [you need to] be able to keep punctuality, cleanliness, good behaviour. […] You need to be patient with the customer, […] you have to be very flexible, and understandable and patient. And that’s it. And smile, yes, that’s right. […] So in general you have to support them and you have to give information and make sure they’re at home, comfortable. That’s it.

Nick maintains that skills such as, for example, patience could be acquired from personal experiences:

Sometimes it’s a matter of time, because you don’t believe you are that patient, as you believe from the experience, and you learn from the experience.

Deploying his tacit skills in his workplace environment allows Nick to contribute to the successful and efficient functioning of the whole shop.

The cases considered within our research have shown that harnessing tacit skills in stimulating and expansive working environments sustains learning outcomes and facilitates the process of work re-entry. Adults re-entering the workplace after their college programmes may experience their working environments as expanding, consolidating or undermining their learning gains. Environments, which are experienced as giving recognition to and supporting deployment of tacit as well as explicit skills, facilitate further development. The parts played by the workers in creating environments, which support their deployment of skills, and their further learning are contributory factors.

**Conclusions: project findings and outcomes**

Our research findings suggest that tacit forms of personal competences are important for adults with interrupted occupational biographies as they move between roles and settings. Different configurations of adult learners’ individual biographies make their personal experiences unique and valuable in the context of their skills and competences that
potentially could be transferred into the learning or workplace setting. Standard qualitative analysis extended by modelling of individual cases and systematic case comparison enabled us to elaborate a larger conceptual model of the significance of tacit skills recognition in adult learner biographies. Personal competences gained from various life experiences are deployed and developed in both college and workplace settings. The acquisition of these skills is often tacit in nature and therefore individuals do not necessarily recognise that they have gained anything valuable. However, these previously acquired skills often become a central part of a learning process when they are deployed and developed in new learning and workplace environments. Tacit skills development is non-linear, and the use of tacit skills is situation-specific: tacit skills may lead to success in one context but not necessarily in another.

The learners with more continuous occupational biographies recorded higher levels of confidence in their personal competences at the outset of courses than those with substantial interruptions. However, our research has revealed that a number of positive factors (such as recognition of skills) may successfully enhance the levels of confidence and self-assurance for all learners, as they progress within their learning or workplace careers. Gender differences are important and have to be taken into account as females, contrary to males, are more likely to recognise, to a certain, extent their personal skills developed as a result of outside-of-work experience.

Our DCA case analysis enabled us to explore the links and interrelationships among various elements of learning/workplace environments. Within our research we modelled 32 cases of adult learners entering new workplace environments (or – in some cases – embarking on new training courses, or – in a number of cases – continuing to look for a job) after participating in various courses in colleges of further education. The case analysis has shown that recognition and deployment of tacit skills are important elements of a learning/workplace environment that may play an important part in the process of facilitating learners’ involvement, social interaction and confidence. The role of tutors/supervisors is important in this context.

This project has significantly advanced our understanding of how environments can expand, consolidate or undermine the learning gains of adults entering new workplaces through retraining. DCA modelling of individual cases can provide a better understanding of adult returners’ experiences in re-entering work. The modelling approach can also be used as a
method to facilitate adult learners’ self-awareness and self-evaluation of their personal and tacit skills.

1 Economic and Social Research Council Award Number L139 225 1005 directed by Helen Rainbird, Karen Evans, Phil Hodkinson and Lorna Unwin


iii We consider ten concepts (or variables), namely involvement, confidence, skills recognition, skills deployment, skills self-recognition earning environment, learning attitudes, interaction, learning outcomes and workplace environment. Each variable has three attributes such as a (positive, high or strong), n (medium or neutral) and b (negative or low). The models show which of the attributes describe a single case study and specifies relationships among the concepts.

Bibliography


