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The Transformative Power of Learning: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the learning experience of apprentices.

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Abstract

This research set out to examine the learning experience of apprentice painters and decorators on the Irish Standards Based Apprenticeship. It focussed on three painting and decorating apprentices from the Dublin Institute of Technology who were coming towards the end of their four year apprenticeship. As such, the participants had experienced the full range of possible learning on the programme. The Irish Standards Based Apprenticeship system incorporates work based learning with college based learning. As such, the learning experience is wide and varied. The main aim of the study was to explore the learning experiences of apprentices on the standards based apprenticeship in their own words. This would provide for unique insights into that learning experience. The research design was interprtivism informed by a constructionist epistemology. As it was exploring the real life experience of the participants it was phenomenological in nature. The research method was one on one semi structured interviews and the data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analyses. One of the findings from this research indicated the transformative power of learning. Each participant effectively experienced a change in their self perception and sense of self as they engaged in the learning process.

Keywords: standards based, apprenticeship, learning experience, interpretive phenomenological analysis

Introduction

It is the intention of this research to explore the learning experience of apprentice painter and decorators undertaking the Irish Standards Based Apprenticeship programme. The Irish Standards Based Apprenticeship (SBA) involves the apprentice undertaking 'structured training in the skills and knowledge of your chosen trade, and undergo specific tests and assessment to ensure that pre-set standards of ability and competence are attained' (Department of Education & Science, 2010) and is generally four years in duration (O'Connor, 2006). Ryan (2005) points to some fundamental principles of the Irish apprenticeship system such as mandatory educational content, joint external regulation and full public funding of vocational preparation outside the workplace. What is most significant is that the system represented a requirement for every apprentice to be assessed and to be successful in that assessment so as to be recognised as a genuine tradesperson (FAS, 1993). In effect the Irish apprenticeship programme moved from a previously time served programme to a competency based programme. It should be pointed out that there is criticism of a competency based model (Fuller & Unwin, 2003) as it can be restrictive for an apprentice and have a narrow focus on learning.

The SBA consists of seven phases of training. Each one of these phases has an assessment which must be passed in order to progress the apprenticeship. Phases 1, 3, 5 and 7 are work based training provided by the employer. The work based training has to be assessed by the employer and the results provided to FAS. The exams themselves are a standardised set of exam specifications drawn up by FAS (FAS, 2007). The apprentice must be competent in all of these tasks in order to progress further. Phases 2, 4 and 6 are off-the job training. Phase 2 consists of a twenty week course in a FAS training centre. Phases 4 and 6 are each ten week courses in an Institute of Technology (IT) (Department of Education and Science, 2010). Once again these phases are assessed by standardised test written by FAS. The current qualification of the National Craft Certificate is placed at Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQI, 2010) and is therefore recognised nationally and internationally (Department of Education & Science, 2010).

There has been a dramatic downturn in the Irish construction industry over the last number of years. There is a predicted drop of 63,000 people in the construction industry from 2008 to 2015 (Behan & Shally, 2010). The number of apprentices starting with employers was down 59% in 2009 with construction related trades taking a bigger drop with a 69% drop (FAS, 2010). The Standards Based Apprenticeship stipulates that each phase must be passed for progression. FAS (2010) issued a press release on the labour market showing that while unemployment is up across all sectors it is up 25% in craftspeople and manual workers. Having no employer means that the work based phases cannot be completed. The apprentices cannot then complete their apprenticeship. This would have an impact then on the learning of the apprentices. Steedman (2010: 29) points out that 'those in apprenticeship and especially construction related apprenticeship are also severally affected by redundancy before completion.' Being made redundant puts an end to an apprenticeship until a new employer can be found. Working under such economic pressure as Ireland is now experience may affect apprenticeship learning. For example, an employer may have to reduce wages which may decrease the motivation of the apprentice to learn. The employer may have to make redundant qualified painters and decorators this possibly hampering the learning environment and the potential work based learning of the apprentice.

Given such an environment in which apprentices now work I would like to ask, *how do apprentice painters and decorators on the Irish standards based apprenticeship experience their learning?* This research attempts to capture a full, holistic experience in the participants own words. As such Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will be utilised. IPA is a relatively new method which privileges a phenomenological, idiographic and interpretative analysis.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) aims at gaining a deeper and richer understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday lived experience and as such does not offer theory but rather offers insight (Van Manen, 1997). It is this insight into the learning experience of the apprentices that this research is exploring. IPA aims to understand experience through the insights provided by those best suited to provide them – the research participants themselves (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005).

Its aim is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world (Smith & Osborn, 1995). Idiographic research focuses on the particular and the individual in attempting to understand individual behaviour (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2007) and as such IPA is idiographic in nature. Idiographic studies consider the participant on his or her own terms which serves to stress the importance of the individual as a unit of analysis (Smith, Harre & Van Langenhove, 1995). The attempt to make sense of a participants experience makes it an interpretative endeavour and is therefore informed by hermeneutics (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Due to the hermeneutic nature of IPA the recommended bracketing by Husserl is seen as less relevant because researchers are inevitably intimately involved in making interpretations (Finlay, 2009). In fact there is a double hermeneutic at work as the participant tries to make sense of the experience and relay that through the interview while at the same time the researcher tries to make sense of the participants account of that experience. In essence the researcher is making sense of the participant making sense (Smith et al, 2009).

There has been some discussion in the literature regarding the validity of this relatively new approach. Giorgi (2010) recently expressed concern with the scientific standing of IPA. Smith (2010) responded robustly to this criticism refuting the fact that the criticism was based upon two book chapters aimed at a foundation level introduction to the method. Indeed, Smith first articulated IPA as a research method in the mid 90s. (ibid). IPA was deemed to be the research method most suited to this research question. As such, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilised in this research as it 'allows for a detailed picture of the psychological processes and rich descriptions of how individuals think and feel about the challenges they face' (Smith, Brewer, Eatough, Stanley, Glendinning & Quarrell, 2006: 487).

Interviews

Data was collected through three interviews with apprentice painters and decorators. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain rich and deep accounts of the learning experience of the participants. Throughout the interviews there was a strong orientation to the fundamental questions of the lived experience (Van Manen, 1997). The interviews were semi-structured life world interviews which provides for a

‘planned and flexible interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena’, (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008: 327).

Interviews are particularly suited for collecting data when there is a need to gain highly personalised data (Gray, 2004) as is required for this study. Tierney & Dilley (2002: 455) point to one utilisation of interviews being a desire to improve ‘our understanding of the social contexts of learning.’ Similar to other IPA studies (e.g. Flowers, Hart & Marriott, 1999; Shinebourne & Smith, 2008, Shinebourne & Smith, 2010) the questions were flexible, open ended and attempted to gently probe the participant. One of the strengths of interviewing is its ability to provide opportunities for probing (Gray, 2004) which is required for IPA. Throughout the interviews I attempted to play the role of an active listener and be flexible in the schedule to follow the concerns of the participants.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted in a quiet hotel lobby in a central location convenient for all the participants. The interviews were recorded using a digital Dictaphone and a mobile phone Dictaphone application. Both sets of digital files were downloaded to a computer and were then transcribed verbatim by the researcher. This allowed for complete immersion in the data set. The audio recordings were also burned onto compact discs to allow for further listening during long commutes. The line numbered transcripts were printed and then photocopied onto A3 paper which was then bound. Using A3 paper meant that the researcher had plenty of room on both sides of the transcripts for notes during the analysis.

The participants

The names of the participants have been changed to ensure their anonymity. The data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological interpretation. IPA aims to have fairly homogenous sample to enable the examination of convergence and divergence in some detail (Smith et al, 2009). This research therefore used three painting and decorating apprentices from the School of Construction. Reduced numbers of participants can provide for a richer depth of analysis than a larger number (Smith et al, 2009).

Colm is a 23 year old male who has been painting for nearly five years. He comes from an agricultural background and works in a mainly rural area. He has worked in no other area since beginning painting. At the time of the interview Colm estimated he had about six weeks left of his apprenticeship and then he would be fully qualified. He was working at the time of the interview and has worked for the same employer throughout his apprenticeship. The company employs between three and five employees including apprentices.

Stephen is a 21 year old male from an urban background who has been painting for nearly four years. Stephen started painting immediately upon leaving school and has worked in no other area. At the time of the interview Stephen is unemployed although he estimated he had twelve weeks left on his apprenticeship before he would be fully qualified. Throughout his apprenticeship he has worked only for the one employer. The company employed between two and six employees depending on the work that was booked in.

Darren is a 24 year old male from an urban background who has been painting for four years. Darren did a two year college course after leaving school. Once this was completed he started serving his apprenticeship. Throughout his apprenticeship he had been employed by the same company which consisted of Darren and his boss. On exiting his last college based phase Darren was made redundant but obtained a place on the redundant apprenticeship scheme. This means he is guaranteed to finish his apprenticeship and get his qualification.

IPA Analysis

The data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis which involved the following steps adapted from Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009: 83):

1. Data Immersion: the data was read and re-read a number of times while also being interspersed with periods spent listening to the audio recordings.

2. Initial Noting: took place where semantic content and language use were explored. Any points of interest were identified. The aim here was to provide a detailed and comprehensive set of notes and comments on the data itself which have

a clear phenomenological focus and attempted to stay close to the participant's explicit meaning. There was also a degree of interpretative noting here as the researcher sought to understand how and why the participants spoke in the way they did. This element of interpretation involves looking at the language used and thinking about the context of any concerns while trying to make sense of a pattern of meaning in the accounts provided. These sets of comprehensive notes were typed up onto a separate document to allow for easier analysis in the next step.

3. Developing Emergent Themes: the data set had grown considerably at this stage. The analysis focused on discrete chunks of transcript which had been identified in the initial noting phase as being of some interest to the research question. Through this process the data set was reduced as items of little importance were discarded. Producing themes from the data set meant producing a concise statement of what was important in the descriptive comments attached to a piece of transcript. In IPA these emergent themes represent the participant's original words and the researcher's interpretation of those words.

4. Mapping Emergent Themes: the next step involves mapping emergent themes directed by how the analyst sees the themes fitting together. Some emergent themes may be discarded depending on the relationship to the research question. The themes were drawn together in a structure allowing for the most important and interesting aspects to be explored. A graphic representation illustrates these emergent themes as well as the super-ordinate themes that develop for each individual participant.

5. Next Case: this step involves moving to the next case and repeating the whole process again. It is important to that the next case is analysed on its own terms and thus fulfil the idiographic requirements of IPA. This required a bracketing of the themes that emerged from the previous analysis. A rigorous analysis following the steps outlined above ensured that such processes occurred.

6. Cross Case Patterns: the final step involved looking for patterns across the three cases. In this research the individual table of themes for each participant was cut up and spread out on a table. Similar themes were grouped together and links sought among those groupings. This process led to some re-labelling of themes and to a

focus on some of the more potent themes in the analysis. These themes were then grouped together into super-ordinate themes.

Overview of super-ordinate themes

The interview scheduled has been structured along two axes – positive learning experience and negative learning experience. These are explored in the work based and college based element of the apprenticeship. In an effort to make the participants comfortable and build a rapport the early questions focus on early learning experiences and the route into apprenticeship.

Three super-ordinate themes emerged from the analysis. The first was the complex relationship with the employer. The second was the importance of structured learning. This paper will deal with the last of the themes, the transformative power of learning. As Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty & Hendry, (2011: 24) point out 'the findings of IPA studies are firmly rooted in the evidence of the words of participants'. As such extensive quotes from the interview transcripts will support the presentation of the findings and inform the analysis.

Transformative power of learning

Darren

Darren talks about doing a task on a job with a very particular and fussy customer where the task had to be carried out so 'it's very nice and smooth' (l.249). When the task was completed he describes how it felt,

> *Em... felt like I was ... becoming a painter, [...] taking it up to the next tier like (l.257-263).*

This task is a 'step up' (l.270) from previous work so it is more difficult than what went before. When he talks about the effect this new learning experience had on him he says 'felt like I was ... becoming a painter' (l.257). This is a very powerful image. Darren sees himself as being an apprentice who has yet to become a painter. It is clear that Darren saw this task as having a transformative effect on his identity as an apprentice. He could now see himself as a painter, fully qualified. He expands further on this notion when he says that he was 'taking it up to the next tier' (l.263). This

transformation is moving Darren to the next level of his journey to qualification. He is also seeing this new learning as a promotion as he says 'I'm stepping up here so be doing more and more, I'd get more responsibilities' (l.275). In this instance Darren is now seeing himself as moving beyond the parameters of his old self and moving up onto the next tier. The next passage shows further evidence of the transformative power of Darren's learning.

When asked about college learning experience he expresses a very potent sentiment,

> *... I'd say... it made you feel good when you stood back and look at your finished graining product and you look back and jeez that looks pretty good, you feel artistic, more than a painter (l.349 – 351).*

This is a very powerful statement in numerous ways. Firstly, it can be seen that Darren likes the acknowledgement of his own work when he says 'jeez that looks pretty good.' Coupled with this are two very strong statements pertaining to the transformative power of learning. Darren says he felt 'artistic'. This portrays a highly skilled creative individual who can produce an item of beauty and value. Linked with this iconic image of being an artist is Darren's assertion that it made him 'more than a painter.' Earlier he talked of becoming a painter but now, with this artistic element introduced, Darren is moving beyond even that. He is surpassing his earlier assertion of becoming qualified and moving past that point. Darren's learning experience has transformed his self image.

Colm

Colm provides a good example of the fluidity of his identity when he talks about a specific learning task. His boss had brought a spray gun to the job and instructed Colm in its use. Throughout this phase of learning Colm's employer was very attentive and ensured that Colm understood everything about the task. When talking about how this 'technical' (l.214) learning made him feel he described it as follows,

> *Well, like… I felt like was out of me time really… like …emmm… it was great for me to do this cos like not many fellas do the spraying and ehh… I knew I could do it so… (l.221-222).*

It can be seen from this passage the transformative power of learning. Colm was carrying out spray painting. Such a task changed his sense of self as he no longer felt

like an apprentice. Learning this 'really good stuff' (l.213) was empowering for Colm. Also the fact that the boss showed him and not the other employees (l.224) contributes to Colm feeling positive about this experience. He points out the uniqueness of the task and also the fact that he knew he could do it. This confidence followed on from a period of structured learning where his boss ensured that Colm could manage this task. This learning has brought Colm to the point where he can look back and assert 'I knew I could it.' This learning experience stands out for Colm. He refers to it as 'not the usual stuff' and 'more technical' (l.214). The result of this learning is that Colm felt like he was a qualified tradesman. This learning event has changed Colm perception of his own identity, he has become qualified and 'out of his time.'

Stephen

Stephen talks about the change that he underwent as an apprentice. The first time he glossed a door he was working with his employer a couple of months. His boss stood behind him while he carried out this task. Stephen describes the likely outcomes from his employer if Stephen made a mistake,

> *So...if you were doing something wrong he'd start to panic and then it'd make you panic so (laughs) especially when you were first starting it was... it was a lot harder but, once I got into it he didn't, he didn't have to ...stand behind me...(l.173-176).*

Stephen begins this passage by talking about the panicky reaction of his boss to a mistake being made. Stephen indicates that his employers panic would cause him to panic also but most especially when he was first starting as an apprentice. Stephen talks about how difficult it was at the beginning but once he 'got into it', meaning that once he progressed further in his apprenticeship, his boss did not have to stand behind him and check he was doing the task correctly. On first reading this it would seem that such a reaction from an employer is less than ideal for an apprentice starting out. It seems over the top and histrionic. For an apprentice who is learning a trade this is a fearful manner in which to be taught. This is not a learning environment which is conducive for the learner. Being fearful of mistakes and the over-reaction of the employer can be negative. For an apprentice starting out this is not a positive learning experience. The mentor should be confident and helpful rather than starting a feeling of panic.

However, if we probe a little deeper there is a nuance to this passage which can be explored. When Stephen talks about his boss panicking and thus causing him to panic he laughs. He is now four years further along in his career and when he reflects upon the spreading panic his employer incited in his younger self he laughs at it. He is effectively laughing at his younger self. This passage shows the transformation that Stephen has undergone.

This interpretation is further substantiated later in the interview. Stephen is once again reflecting upon his work based learning. Once more he talks about his employers reactions to mistakes being made,

> *He wouldn't shout now, his voice would just go high pitched and it seemed like everything just fell apart in his life and he'd nearly start crying and so... you'd start panicking a little bit (laughs good naturedly) (l.247-249).*

In two separate passages he has now referred to his boss' panicky reactions as a young apprentice. Even though he was a young adult at the time he was modelling his behaviour from the authority figure of his boss. His younger self was almost childlike in that he panicked when he saw that authority figure panicking. His sense of himself as a young apprentice was dependent on his employer. However, it is now four years later and he is looking back and he can laugh. Stephen's reminiscence the second time around in the interview brings out a stronger reaction in his laughing as he reflects upon the past. He is no longer the young apprentice that can be panicked by his employer's reaction. He has grown beyond that to such a degree that he can look back upon his younger self and laugh at his younger self's reaction.

Discussion.

This research has asked the question, *how do apprentice painters and decorators on the Irish standards based apprenticeship experience their learning?* It is important to note that findings from a phenomenological research cannot be generalized to a wider population they can still prove relevant to other people and other settings (Finlay, 2009). The data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. IPA is an approach that emphasises the importance of individual accounts

(Pringle et al, 2011). However, identified common threads across accounts coupled with a critical commentary can lead to useful insights which have wider implications (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). In IPA studies it is recommended that the researcher should think in terms of 'theoretical transferability rather than empirical generalizability (Smith et al, 2009: 51). In such a case the researcher aims to provide an account which links the analysis with a personal and professional experience as well as the claims in the extant literature.

Billet & Somerville (2004) refer to how an individual engages in workplace tasks is central to the learning that occurs and the level of engagement is partly shaped by an individual's identity. Having an occupational identity is very important to young people's sense of worth and carries status in the adult community (Unwin & Fuller, 2005). This research has shown how that identity transformed through the learning that the apprentices experienced. This transformation is a positive aspect to the participant's experience of learning and involved the apprentices seeing themselves as becoming something more than apprentices. Individual experiences in social practices such as workplaces can transformationally contribute to changes in their sense of self in terms of identity (Billet & Somerville, 2004). Identity appears to shift as biographical narratives regarding peoples' capabilities are rewritten and extended (James, 2006). Billet & Somerville (2004) say that the formation of self is likely to be salient for the individuals learning and their engagement in transformatory events, such as remaking of work as it transforms across their working life. The self directs the intentionality behind this learning and yet the self is transformed by these events.

The participants seemed to be aware that they had changed throughout their apprenticeship. Fuller & Unwin's (2003) research which showed how an apprentice was working upon the assumption that he was the one learning even though there was evidence that he was also helping others to learn. Fuller & Unwin contend that the apprentice constructed his identity around the idea of being a novice despite the strong evidence contrary to this. This research has shown that the participants envisioned themselves as undergoing change through their learning. The transformative growth came about through exposure to

different learning tasks. In Darren's case it was a job specific task requiring extra care and skill. Similarly Colm's transformation came about through a very new and technical skill requiring expert knowledge.

Ashforth (2001, cited in Isopahkala-Bouret, 2008) says that persons assume the exemplary characteristics of a certain socially defined role to which we perceive ourselves belonging. Apprentice painters and decorators would have no doubt as to their status regarding their roles. It is endemic to an apprenticeship that the learner is subordinate to the Master. As such it may be difficult for the apprentice to grow out of that role. However, Unwin & Fuller (2005) state that young people's vocational identity is not fixed and evolves during the course of their engagement with learning opportunities and barriers in the workplace. Similarly, Isopahkala-Bouret (2008) contends that work roles are not fixed but rather are negotiated within structural restrictions in different sociocultural contexts. From the testimonies of the participants it can be seen that there were instances when they grew outside of their apprenticeship role. Darren is probably the most emotive when he says he felt like he was 'more than a painter'. As well as gaining new knowledge, skills and abilities, the outcomes of role learning are a clarification of what the new role is and eventually, transformation of professional identity (Ashforth, 2001, cited in Isopahkala-Bouret, 2008). This research would indicate just such an outcome from the apprentices learning experiences.

The transformative power of the learning experience by the apprentices is similar to what Isopahkala-Bouret (2008) terms perspective transformation. Perspective transformation 'alters the way people understand themselves, their relationships with others and the world. It changes cognitive, emotional, and behavioural routines of perceiving and interpreting things. As a result, one is able to have new priorities and ways of thinking and doing' (ibid: 72).

Other findings from this research indicate that the participants viewed college as the place for learning. Nevertheless, at some level the participants could identify that they had indeed learned in the workplace. In fact Darren's powerful example of becoming a painter occurred on a job and Colm's happened directly as a result of

specific workplace learning. So, despite the apprentices view that college is for learning it would seem that they learned elsewhere also. As Lave & Wenger (1991: 40) point out 'legitimate peripheral participation takes place no matter which educational form provides a context for learning, or whether there is any intentional instruction.' Also, different identities emerge through participation in different learning curricula (James, 2006). In addition to this Billet & Somerville (2004) point out that in transformative learning workers draw on all forms of learning from formal and informal to theoretical and practical to enable such a transition that a transformation involves.

Lave & Wenger (1991) talk about systems within a social context. These systems, such as new activities, performing new tasks and functions and mastering new understandings, all occur within a broad system of relations in which they have meaning. These systems arise out of and are reproduced by social communities which relate to systems of relations among persons. Persons are defined by and in turn define these relations. When a person learns something the implication then is that the person becomes a different person with respect to the possibilities offered by these systems of relations. In effect the learning that occurs involves the construction of identities. Billet & Somerville (2004: 314) echo this when they say that learning is 'both shaped by, and in turn shapes, individual identities.' This type of process would appear to have happened in this research where the social community defines the apprentice as an apprentice. Through the relations with that community, in this case employers, teachers and work colleagues, learning has occurred. Through this learning the identity of the apprentices has changed and they have moved, however momentarily, beyond being an apprentice.

Cheng (2011) talks about the power of transformative learning as being a product of both the teacher and the student. From a student's standpoint the outcome of transformative learning were results such as skills developed for future profession, a higher level of achievement exhibited through increased confidence in themselves and in their knowledge. In contrast, Billett & Somerville (2004) say that identity transformations in the workplace are the products of individuals remaking or transforming practice. These transformations are not separate from, or conceivable without, individual's active involvement and engagement. In this research both

Darren and Colm engaged in new practices which were beyond the normal routine work of their everyday landscape. Colm in particular highlights the new aspect of his learning when he talks about using a spray gun.

Both Colm and Darren highlighted particular moments in which the transformative power of learning was apparent. However, Billett & Somerville (2004) findings seem to disagree with this. Their research shows that identity transformations are not specific to particular learning moments such as significant events or particular learning incidents such as schools. They contend that such transformations are inherent in everyday conscious thought which is actively seeking to make sense of the encountered world. Stephen's experience would seem to conform to such contention as his transformation occurred over the period of his apprenticeship rather in a specific moment

Conclusion

This research indicates the need to refocus an understanding of the workplace and see it in the same light as college. Aarkrog (2005) argues convincingly that learning in the work place must be supplemented with school based learning. He concedes the unique characteristics of both the work place and the school which combined contribute to the effectiveness of such a programme where work place and school based learning are mixed. However, the school based learning should not supplant the work place learning.

An understanding that a workplace is a place of learning is required from learners engaging in workplace practices (Billett, 2002) and I would contend that there is an element of responsibility on the apprentices as well as the employers in this regard. This understanding is essential for apprenticeship to work effectively. This must be embedded within the mindset of apprentices to highlight the full potential of all the aspects of learning. In this manner the relationship the apprentice has with the employer is essential in highlighting this issue. As Billett (2002) points out, if learning is seen as something particular to educational institutes rather than as a product of social practices then this viewpoint may well inhibit understanding about learning and in particular learning through the work place.

It came across through this research that work place learning did not feature very strongly in the perceptions of the participants and they did not seem to realise this aspect of their apprenticeship. This needs to be addressed and made explicit to apprentices. Essentially, apprentices on the standards based apprenticeship programme are expected to learn at all stages of their programme. Further to this they have to be made aware that this learning is meant to be assessed. Aarkrog (2005) calls for a clear indication of which learning outcomes are expected from each particular place of learning. This would seem to absent from the experience of the participants of this study. The relationship between the employer and apprentice is a means of communicating this aspect of the programme.

In terms of the college based element Mullins (2005) sounds a warning note that Institutions involved in education that are rarely brought to account by external agencies can develop an imperialistic dynamic and thus engage in a transmission model type of education. Such a transmission model of education would be detrimental for the learner as it involves at its simplest level an information exchange between teacher and student. To date there is no such quality control on the SBA. O'Connor's (2005) research sought opinions form stakeholders such as employers, trainers, trade unions and apprentices on the success of the SBA as an effective apprenticeship system. There are strengths to SBA such as setting a minimum competence and a good balance between on and off-the-job Phases. There are also drawbacks to SBA such as lack of assessment for the on-the-job Phases by many employers and a lack of monitoring of the on-the-job phases by FAS.

The transformative power of learning was highlighted through this research. It is perhaps significant that two of the participants were able to highlight specific leaning incidents in which this transformation occurred. As has been stated before the participants had a preconceived idea that college was for learning and therefore expected to learn. If they had an expectation that they would learn in the workplace they would then expand the possibility of the transformative power of their learning. It is vital that apprentices see their employers and indeed their colleagues as teachers. Fitzmaurice (2008: 347) says that the 'good teacher seeks to support students to

develop to their full potential as human beings.' I would agree with this sentiment and would like to see attitude adopted by employers as they are also teachers.

Learning is obviously a powerful enabler. However, the learning potential of the apprentices did not seem extensive. Unwin & Fuller (2005) talk about restrictive and expansive learning environments. Expansive learning environments feature access to broad experience, knowledge based as well as competence based studies as well as access to career progression. Restrictive approaches provide limited opportunities for progression and development. Such an expansive learning environment would potentially contribute to much more transformational learning for the apprentice.

Yoong Ng & Cervero (2005) conclude that a triangular perspective should inform the design of learning in the workplace. This triumvirate would incorporate the 'three elements of power - organisational ownership, organisation structure and theories of adult education that are framed within the two former forces of power (ibid: 503). I would contend that there should be a voice for the learner in this model.

This research sought to investigate the learning experience of apprentices on the Irish Standards Based Apprenticeship programme and a significant point became clear. Whatever the quality of the learning opportunities that appear it is individuals themselves who decide to what extent they want to engage in those learning opportunities (Rainbird, Fuller & Munro, 2004). The learner must be motivated to learn and bring this motivation to the learning environment whether this is a work place or college. Beginning with such a motivation can only increase the potential for a positive learning experience regardless of the course of study undertaken.

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