

## **Engaging in continuing education and training: Learning preferences of worker-learners in the health and community services industry**

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Current tertiary education and training provisions are designed mainly to meet the learning needs of those preparing for entry into employment and specific occupations. Yet, changing work, new work requirements, an ageing workforce and the ongoing need for employability across lengthening working lives make it imperative that this educational focus be broadened to include continuing education and training provisions for those already in the workforce. To address this refocusing of the education and training effort, this paper proposes that learning at work, encompassing practice-based experiences supported by both formal and informal workplace arrangements, constitute an effective continuing education and training model for worker-learners in the aged care industry. It draws on data from semi-structured interviews and written responses from 51 workers who show preferences for such a model. Not only do aged care workers like engaging in learning independently and with co-workers and workplace facilitators, they prefer a larger component of courses to be delivered at the work site. The implications of these findings are summarised in this article.

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## **Introduction**

The pace and extent of changes in occupational and work requirements and transforming work practices have impacts on the kinds of work available to be undertaken; how that work is organised and practised; the requirements of that work; and with whom workers interact to understand and successfully complete their work (Billett, 2006a). These changes arise in different ways across occupations and workplaces. However, uniformly they require workers to continually learn and update their work-related capacities, and, for many, across lengthening working lives. Hence, there is an increasing emphasis on continuing education and training (CET) provisions to assist individuals to be both skilful in ways required by their current work situations and yet be adaptable in addressing these ongoing changes. There is a need, seemingly, for all workers to constantly acquire and create new and actionable knowledge and skills as they continue to develop dispositions, personal qualities and ‘ways of being’ (Eraut, 2004) appropriate for their work and working lives (Barnett, 2006).

As much of work requirements and changes within them are shaped by work practices and their socio-cultural environments, much of that development may need to be acquired at and through their work). The occupational learning occurring in the context of work is influenced by local “rules, values, attitudes, expectations etc.” (Ellstrom, Svesson & Aberg 2004: 479).” This is because learning at work is shaped and transformed by “material, social, discursive and historical conditions and relations” (p.479) and requires personal reflection as well as collaboration with fellow workers and clients (Kemmis, 2005). Similarly, Hodkinson, Biesta and James (2008) identify ways in which learners as well as the learning situation shape their learning. They propose that, while theories of learning cultures (explaining why situations influence learning) are critical, cultural theories of learning (explaining how and why people learn) are also significant to the understanding of learning. Moreover, influences of situations and individuals include inevitable relations between them that shape learning in personally distinct ways (Billett 2006b). These propositions suggest that learning is indeterminate in workplaces than in classrooms of tertiary education institutions, although the same considerations apply to both kinds of settings. However,

learning at work may require specific sets of skills and attitudes such as those proposed by Tennant and McMullen (2008), which include:

how to analyse experiences, the ability to learn from others, the ability to act without all the facts available, choosing among multiple courses of action, learning about organisational culture, using a wide range of resources and activities as learning opportunities (e.g. memos, policies, decision making processes), and understanding the competing and varied interests in the shaping of one's work or professional identity (p. 525).

This skill set may complement those required for learning in educational programs including: learning from instruction (e.g., listening, taking notes, summarising, questioning); performing assigned learning tasks (e.g., understanding the purpose of a task, following instructions, anticipating the kinds of responses required); relating practical experiences to the material being taught and applying the principles derived from theory and research; basic learning skills (e.g., finding information, organising and categorising thoughts, reviewing material for examinations, developing exam techniques); and learning how to generalise and when to generalise (Tennant, 2000, p. 126-127).

The workplace learning skills, suggested by Tennant and McMullen (2008), highlight the centrality of learners' action and engagement in their learning and development. These authors advocate a greater emphasis on learning than teaching with individuals directing their own learning in meeting their immediate needs. Such premises might contradict current educational practice founded more on pre-specified content and outcomes rather than on individually initiated learning and development.

Regardless, the demand for on-going learning and particular contributions of the workplace draw attention to the central role that tertiary education and training (TET) provisions need to play in ensuring Australian workers constitute a viable and productive workforce as expectations of greater efficiencies and higher productivity can only be realised if individual workers learn to effectively confront these challenges. However, busy workers likely need to be supported in particular ways to develop further their occupational capacities for them to respond to changing

work requirements. They already possess varying levels of existing occupational knowledge and work experiences and these serve as invaluable foundations for their ongoing learning.

### *Current learning in the workplace*

Workers consciously or unconsciously engage in learning while performing daily work tasks to meet immediate situated or contextual goals (e.g., when workers need to learn and know just enough to perform a task or respond to a problem at a particular time). More accurately this kind of learning is participative and involves workers engaging in and learning through goal directed activities at and through work. Workers also are likely to habitually engage in learning through observation of work practices (Tennant & McMullen, 2008) and through interactions with others (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). What they learn in the workplace through such processes is understandably linked to the tasks being performed at the time, as is the case with those in educational institutions despite erroneous claims that knowledge learnt in such institutions is often either exemplified or abstracted from everyday practices. Consequently, their knowledge and experiences and that of their co-workers provide rich foundations and sources of learning. Essentially, learning in the workplace becomes a process as well as a product when meanings are derived by the practices of the work community (Gheradhi, 2009) which allow learners to construct their understandings to a level of sophistication that is influenced by but linked to the circumstances of practice (Jordan, 1989).

Workers may also participate in reflexive pedagogy, for example, by engaging in dialogue with other workers for collective meaning making (Kemmis, 2005). The workplace environment may support these types of learning in productive ways and thereby help develop capacities to achieve individual as well as organisational outcomes. However, worker-learners may not always perceive their development in knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs, senses, and so on, as learning *per se* (Billett, 2001). So, when implementing experiences that are enacted in the workplace, they may need to acquaint themselves or be acquainted with the pedagogical potential of these opportunities and then appraise them in terms of the best options to meet their learning needs. Therefore, trainers and others

responsible for training in workplaces and TET providers have a key role in assisting and engaging with these learners, subsequently enhancing learning experiences that are afforded to them in the workplace and/or through educational programs.

### **CET provisions in prospect**

Workers' intentions for engaging in continuing education and training (CET) are to advance their current knowledge and competencies. Given that this further development will arise mainly through engagement in the occupational practice, it is worth considering how that learning might be progressed within the context of their current work practices and supplemented with experiences in educational institutions. That is, rather than assuming a course-based approach as both desirable and the most efficacious of learning experiences, it is important to consider how these provisions might also be embedded and intermingled (embodied with work activities as well as training in educational institutions), with a stronger emphasis on individuals' learning than on their being taught. One reason for promoting this emphasis on active engagement by learners is that the interests of CET participants in learning may be less in the transmission of knowledge that others say they should learn, such as is common in entry level training, than in meeting more immediate needs. As the workplace presents an authentic site full of rich sources of learning, it makes sense to draw on these and situate more CET within the workplace than in educational institutions. Moreover, as CET has a purpose in assisting individuals with their vocation—an important learning factor for individuals and their workplaces—it can best serve this purpose if what is learnt is embedded and embodied (Choy & Delahaye, 2009) into the work context. To achieve these goals, then, CET arrangements will need to consider more broadly curriculum and pedagogic (i.e. support for learning) practices than those that are currently operating in tertiary educational institutions for entry level training. Therefore, the enactment of a system for CET needs to be responsive not only to individuals but also to workplaces and communities. Consequently, CET provisions need to employ models and approaches comprising curriculum and pedagogical strategies that appropriately utilise worker-learners' knowledge and experiences for the benefit of individuals, their co-workers, and their

workplaces. Needed here is a range of models and approaches that are tolerant to customisation for specific learner groups, industries and workplaces. Moreover, the development of effective models and approaches requires wide consultations with key stakeholders who include worker-learners, workplace managers, TET staff and policy makers. Importantly, learners' preferences for CET must form key considerations because, as Billett (2011a: 221) proposes, "It is students who make decisions about how they engage with what they are provided through educational programs and experiences. This decision-making includes the degree of effort that they exercise when engaging with what they experience."

It is these sets of propositions and premises that inform the practical enquiry which sought to identify how best employees in the aged care industry continue to learn for and at work, whose findings are discussed here.

### **Aged care workforce**

Aged care workers are part of over 1.35 million community services and health workforce in Australia, which represents the largest industry group in the country (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). This figure has increased by 4.6 per cent over the previous year's data and it is estimated that by 2016 one in four new jobs (about 323,000) will be generated in this industry group (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). Compared with employees in other industries, aged care workers are generally older, with an average age of 43 years, are more likely to be women (up to 79%) and to be employed on a part-time basis (Community Services & Health Industry Skills Council, 2012).

With a projected increase in demand for new workers, some of whom are expected to be engaged in changing work practices, it is important to understand how workers in this industry are engaging in learning for CET, how they prefer their learning to be organised and, consequently, how best CET might be enacted for them. The research described below addresses these considerations.

## **The research**

The findings reported here are part of a three year project aiming to identify effective models and related pedagogic practices that can respond to the growing demand for CET. Data from interviews with 51 workers employed in the aged care (including disability care facilities) industry in Queensland and Western Australia are drawn upon here. To best understand how workers in this industry are engaging in learning for CET and how they prefer their learning to be organised, a mixed method research design comprising semi-structured, face-to-face interviews and a short survey was used to gather that data. The survey required the informants to respond to written questions containing tick boxes with items relating to how they are learning in their current job and how they would prefer to be assisted for future learning. The survey items on ways learning is supported were derived from a literature review (Billett et al. 2012). Informants indicated which forms of support applies to their experiences of and processes of learning, how frequently they accessed and experienced the selected ones, and their three most preferred kinds of support. During the interviews, the informants shared their experiences in learning when preparing for employment, how they learn for their current jobs, how their learning was supported in their current job, and their views about assessment and certification of learning.

The interviews were transcribed, de-identified, and analysed using NVivo software. Text segments were coded around five themes: i) what has assisted their work-related learning; ii) what has inhibited their work-related learning; iii) what kinds of experiences are proposed as being ideal for particular kinds of outcomes; iv) how should CET experiences best be organised for particular purposes; and v) what arrangements need to be made to support effective CET provisions.

Responses to tick boxes were analysed for frequencies using the SPSS software. The findings were examined to suggest how best the TET system (i.e. VET, ACE, higher education, learning in the workplace, as defined by NCVER) can sustain aged care workers' learning for employability across lengthening working lives.

### *Informants*

Of the 51 informants over two thirds (73%) was based in metropolitan areas and the remainder (27%) in regional areas of South East Queensland and Western Australia. They were predominantly female (82%) reflecting the gender distribution of workers in this industry. Most workers (64%) were aged over 40 years. Just under half (46%) of the informants had worked in the industry for fewer than five years, about a third (31%) between 5 and 10 years, 21% for 11-20 years and just one had been in the industry for over twenty years. About half (53%) the sample was employed in full-time roles, 43% as part-time, and only 4% as casual employees. The size of workplaces in which they were employed ranged from 5 to over 200 employees and almost half the workers (49%) were in facilities with between 21-99 staff. The highest qualifications held by informants ranged from School Certificates (26%), Vocational Certificates (23%), Diplomas or Advanced Diplomas (19%), undergraduate degrees (13%) or postgraduate qualification (just one informant). The aged care industry is regulated by legislation designed to secure and improve client services and influenced by new technologies. Consequently, workers are required to engage in CET that may or may not necessarily lead to a formal qualification. Although much of this training is sponsored by employers (often partially funded by government grants) and completed during working hours, other forms are self-funded and completed outside of work.

### **Current ways of learning and preferences for CET provisions**

As noted, informants indicated how they are currently learning and being supported in the workplace and also how they prefer to learn and be supported, by identifying actual and preferred means against a list of nine ways of learning identified in the literature. They could indicate more than one item and also introduce additional ways under the "Other" category. Table 1 presents frequencies and ranking of their responses. In the left-hand column is the listing of ways in which learning might progress. The central column indicates the frequency of the current means by which they learn. The right-hand column indicates their preference for means of learning. In the right-hand column of both the current and preferred approaches is an ordinal ranking against each item.



*Table 1 Aged care workers' ways of learning and preferences (N=51)*

<b>Ways of learning</b>		<b>Current n / %</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Preference n / %</b>	<b>Rank</b>
a.	Everyday learning through work - individually	44 [86.3]	1	29 [56.9]	2
b.	Everyday learning through work individually - assisted by other workers	42 [82.4]	2	30 [58.8]	1
c.	Everyday learning + group training courses at work from employer	34 [66.7]	3	27 [53.0]	3
d.	Everyday learning + training courses away from work (off-site)	23 [37.3]	5	14 [28.1]	7
e.	On-site learning with individual mentoring: one-to-one	19 [37.3]	5	15 [29.4]	6
f.	Small group training at work – external provider	23 [45.1]	4	18 [35.3]	4
g.	Individual training at work – external provider	18 [35.3]	7	18 [35.3]	4
h.	Learning that was offered only at an educational institution	3 [5.9]	8	1 [2.0]	8
i.	Site induction	1 [2.0]	9	0	

Overall, these two sets of frequencies indicate a close alignment between how the workers are currently learning and their preferred means. Three findings are noteworthy here. First, the respondents indicate they mostly learnt at work rather than going off-site for training and this workplace-based approach is also their preferred approach. Second, they reported learning from other workers in and through work activities. Third, they learn through interactions with others (i.e. in groups) and their learning is supported by experienced workers or by external trainers or teachers.

Provisions, such as *individual training at work* supported by an external provider (ranked 7) are less frequently reported, perhaps because this option was not readily available for these workers.

However, it was the fourth most preferred way of learning.

*Learning that was offered only at an educational institution* was less frequently used (3 informants) and also least preferred (one informant), further substantiating that these workers are learning at work and want to continue accessing and utilising the provisions supporting their learning at work. However, it also is likely that for some workers this option is not fully afforded by their work situation. One reason for informants favouring learning in the workplace is to minimise, even avoid, time away from the worksite. For many, such absences from work have financial implications unless they are paid to complete training when away from work. So, engagement in learning for CET tends to be voluntary and directed by individuals' interests and aspirations, but others may be compulsory (e.g., to meet occupational or legislative requirements or those imposed by the employer). Many employers in a sector like aged care may now prioritise funds for training related to compliance and licensing purposes, and be selective about funding other types of CET. Hence, workers interested in career progression beyond their current place of employment increasingly have to pay for accredited courses offered by TET institutions.

Learning at work allows workers to remain at work and continue developing the types of competencies they are expected to have. Furthermore, the informants suggest that there is often the opportunity for new activities and tasks to be learnt and the optimal way to acquire such learning was 'on-the-job'. As Brianna (a pseudonym, as are other names in the paper) explains,

For this particular job, everything changes every day. So, unless you're doing it on the job, there's no way of learning this position.

Here she refers to the influence of new technologies and procedural requirements driven by workplace health and safety matters, and also that the conditions and needs of residents in the care facilities are often unpredictable. Faced with unfamiliar problems regularly, individuals and teams need to work out different ways to solve problems at the worksite. Brianna's comment also reflects the situational nature of the job tasks that anticipate uncertain events. It, therefore, becomes important to identify effective aspects of the workplace curriculum and make available the types of pedagogical support that will facilitate and sustain continued learning. Essentially, learning provisions need to serve as a balance between the types of learning that concentrate on meeting the outcomes of the workplace and those that contribute to individual developmental needs to augment workers' employability and career progression.

Brianna's statement draws attention to the need to engage in on-going learning to maintain her employability which includes responding to constant changes, and the necessity for this learning to involve hands-on experiences. Much of aged care work is manually skill based so hands-on experiences is needed to extend their repertoire of techniques when giving care. The most effective way of learning the required skills are reported as being through circumstances of work which presents authenticity and accessibility to more experienced co-workers for guidance and support. Often, work arrangements and workplace cultures within these aged care workplaces support this type of learning, for example, through working with a more experienced buddy or rotations in different areas in aged care facilities to learn all aspects of service provisions. This provision is illustrated in the following quotation by Noela and Queenie:

I have a buddy shift: somebody else teaching me how to do things well (Noela).

You learn from others' perspectives and experiences (Queenie).

Both statements illustrate the significance of guidance from more experienced co-workers. Working in teams presents occasions for just-in-time and just-what-is-needed learning, as described by

Merriam and Caffarella (1991). These authors claim that within work settings, employees interact with others and thus are afforded opportunities to adopt better techniques that they observe others using. Within their circumstances of practice they make sense of what is learnt to suit how activities are undertaken in their specific worksite. Hence, meanings are negotiated through mutual engagement and participation by sharing a common language, familiar stories, symbols, jargons and concepts.

What informants suggest in the survey as being widely used to provide guidance and practice to achieve strategic as well as task-specific outcomes (Billett, 2001) are developmental opportunities in the forms of modelling, coaching and mentoring. These ways of learning are often intentionally arranged for less experienced workers, for instance, through a buddy system commonly practised in the aged care industry, but facilitated by work arrangements where a less experienced worker is teamed with a more experienced co-worker. Another informant, Ivy, emphasised mentors' role in extending novice workers' ability to organise and conduct work to address the practices of particular workplaces. Furthermore, she claimed that such learning arises from performing tasks in ways most acceptable in the context of specific workplaces. So, guided learning practices are not only available within this industry, but are valued by aged care workers.

Surprisingly, only one informant preferred learning that is offered only at educational institutions. The survey data show a preference for learning to be supported through social interaction (i.e. small groups) mainly at the worksite, and, importantly, facilitated by experts. These provisions were also often associated with career progression, using certification to secure advancement. Moreover, a strong preference for practice-based experiences, with educational interventions for individuals and groups (35% for each) is evident in the responses. The workers' key interests in learning from educational institutions were in 'new', 'best', and 'proper' practices (content they could not easily learn through everyday work activities or from co-workers) and methods to appraise current practices. Interestingly, they acknowledged that some of these interests were also met by learning from their industry suppliers. Elaborating on the provisions offered only by educational institutions, the workers stipulated 2-4 hour

workshops or 2 to 3 day sessions are best suited to minimise time away from work. Lack of time was a major barrier to participation, unless the learning was directly linked to daily practice, a finding also reported by Bennett et al. (2000) and Moore et al. (2000). These workers also reported that most training provided by education institutions is aligned within certificate level courses, and comprise mandatory requirements for age care work. There was very limited interest in or preference for on-line and computer based learning provisions by educational providers.

While the findings about how workers prefer to learn are routine learning practices, they highlight two specific challenges to current provisions offered by TET providers. First, the preferred provisions are distinct from those organised for entry into employment (e.g., Individual training at work that is supported by an external provider; block release training off the worksite; apprenticeship type learning; and all training done in external training organisations). Second, most of the preferred CET provisions are situated in workplaces as opposed to campus-based training for existing workers engaged in continuing education and training. This is not surprising because learning support in the workplace may be more pertinent and specifically directed than support in TET institutions (Groot, van dan Ber, Endedijk, Beukelen and Simons, 2011) as acknowledged by workers. Meeting these two preferences could be achieved through practice-based experiences augmented by educational interventions. Indeed, this augmentation or additional support was a key finding.

### **Current support for learning and preferred support**

Beyond the overall provision of learning experiences, informants also indicated current experiences and preferred options for support for that learning. Data reported in Table 2 shows how their learning in the workplace is supported by indicating which of the seven kinds of common support they experienced. More than one option from the list could be chosen. Informants also indicated their three most preferred forms of support. The frequencies and ranking of these are presented in Table 2. In this table, the left hand column comprises the common types of *Support with learning* that were identified from the literature, the data in the second and fourth columns, labelled *Current support* and *Preferred support* respectively show informants'

responses to these categories, while the third and right-hand columns show responses to the respective ordinal rankings of these categories.

*Table 2 Ways learning is supported in the workplace and learner preferences for support (N=51)*

Support with learning		Current support n / %	Rank	Preferred support n / %	Rank
i)	Direct teaching in a group (e.g. a trainer in a classroom at work)	39 [76.5]	1	13 [45.1]	5
ii)	Direct teaching by a workplace expert	37 [72.6]	3	27 [52.9]	3
iii)	Learning in a self-managed group in the workplace with a facilitator	30 [58.8]	5	25 [49.0]	4
iv)	Group activities in a classroom, guided by a trainer or facilitator	32 [62.8]	4	28 [54.9]	2
v)	Working and sharing with another person on the job	39 [76.5]	1	32 [62.8]	1
vi)	Learning totally online individually with trainer	10 [19.6]	7	3 [5.9]	7
vii)	Self-directed learning individually – online, books, etc.	23 [45.1]	6	10 [19.6]	6

The most frequently reported means by which workers' learning is supported is through: *direct teaching in a group* (e.g. a trainer in a classroom), and *working and sharing with another person on the job* (77%). It is noteworthy that *working and sharing with another person on the job* was also the most preferred form of support.

Access and availability of others who can assist with learning is useful for undefined or non-prescribed learning and non-routine learning where individuals are required to evaluate the situation, and enact appropriate action and outcomes (Ellstrom, 2001). So, the high preference for working and sharing found here supports this proposition. Given that the tasks for care services in the aged care industry commonly require more than one person, working with buddies is a common practice and allows the sharing of ideas and learning. As noted, typically, workers are paired with a more experienced co-worker who guides and mentors the less experienced worker as they work with residents in their workplaces. The rostered work shifts offer opportunities to work and learn with various buddies as individuals are rotated in different areas of the workplace. The system of buddying and rotation nurtures a culture of sharing and learning together to complete work tasks, allowing individuals to engage in two types of complementary learning: adaptive and developmental (Ellstrom, 2001). While these arrangements present opportunities and afford learning, it is the individual's agency, intentionality (Billett, 2009) and epistemologies (Brookfield, 1997; and Marsick, 1988) that determine how much meaningful learning takes place. As a pedagogical strategy, *working and sharing with another person on the job* is premised on the agency of learners to seek knowledge and understandings from the more experienced co-workers for those co-workers to have the appropriate skills to coach their colleagues.

A response by 73% of the sample to *Direct teaching by a workplace expert* (this being the third most preferred option) suggests that workers value the knowledge and expertise of co-workers who form a rich learning resource. Ellstrom, Svensson and Aberg's (2004) findings also showed that other workers can receive and provide assistance in a mutual way. However, learning opportunities rely on availability, accessibility, willingness and ability (in terms of skills) of the expert to appropriately facilitate learning.

The survey results highlight common practices of learning in groups: *Direct teaching in a group* (e.g. a trainer in a classroom at work) (77%); *Group activities in a classroom, guided by a trainer or facilitator* (63%); and *Learning in a self-managed group in the workplace with a facilitator* (59%). These practices reflect the social

nature of learning occupational knowledge where different social practices in the workplace allow for appropriating and structuring knowledge in different ways. When meanings and knowledge are constructed jointly it allows meaningfulness for the worksite and its intents. Lave and Wenger (1991), for instance, proposed that learning settings in the circumstances of work are socially authentic and generate the types of learning required to develop procedural capacities and strengthen conceptual links and dispositional attributes required for effective work practice. Group interactions encourage and generate mindful learning that the workplace community can recognise, value and share. This exemplifies Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory on social practice as a primary generative phenomenon. However, the opportunities for generative learning in groups may also be contested. Moreover, productive group learning needs to have clear connections to daily tasks, form part of daily activities, and have a supportive structure within the worksite.

The three most frequently reported pedagogical preferences were: *Working and sharing with another person on the job* (63%); *Group activities in a classroom, guided by a training or facilitator* (55%); and *Direct teaching by a workplace expert* (53%). The frequencies for the first two preferences support immediate socially-mediated learning based in the workplace. Not surprisingly, these workers' participation in *direct teaching in a group* based in a classroom, which is more teacher focused, is not highly preferred (ranked 5 out of 7) by these informants. Instead, they prefer group activities that are learner-focused and allow them to interact with each other, yet where there is access to a trainer or facilitator. This preference for group learning concurs with Eraut's (2004) findings on the types of activities that account for most of the learning in the workplace (group activities, working with others, tackling challenges, and working with clients).

While *Self-directed learning individually -online, books, etc.* and *Learning totally online individually with trainer* are supported by the employers, these provisions are not preferred by many of the informants.



In summary, the most frequently reported and preferred means through which these aged care workers want to engage in CET are through:

- individuals working and learning through work and being assisted by other workers
- facilitated/expert guided group processes
- the integration of experiences in work and education settings and
- direct support for learning – to individuals or groups from a more experienced worker to learn the capacities required to perform the occupational tasks effectively.

The preferences here suggest that a model for providing and organising CET may include:

- (i) Work-based experiences with direct guidance
- (ii) Work-based learning experiences in groups and
- (iii) Work-based experiences with educational interventions (e.g. TET based training + work-based practice).

These findings have implications for how CET provisions might need to be organised, both in workplaces and educational institutions for a sector such as health and community services.

### **Implications for CET provisions**

The means of, and preferences for, support for learning reported by the aged care workers in this study highlight four key considerations discussed below.

- i) These workers engage with CET mainly to advance their existing knowledge and competencies to perform and improve daily work tasks. Therefore, CET provisions need to meet contemporary skill and occupational needs for effective workplace and industry practices (i.e. to acquire and keep a job). So it is imperative for TET staff to maintain the currency of industry knowledge and expertise. CET provisions must also be aligned with current and emerging legislative requirements and,

where possible, offer opportunities for accreditation within the Australian Qualification Framework.

- ii) The findings here point to the need for an extension and affordance of learning opportunities in the informants' workplaces. This will necessitate embedding and embodying learning experiences in the context of particular occupations and workplaces so that offerings by educational institutions are well integrated. Such practice-based provisions demand new ways of harnessing authentic learning provisions available in the workplace that require different forms of partnerships between employers and educational institutions. This change might be characterised by more purposeful workplace pedagogies that utilise the existing sets of internal expertise of co-workers as well as external experts. Here, workers too need skills to assist each other with co-learning.
- iii) CET participants already have experience in learning and work, so it is critical that the provisions concentrate more on workers' learning and less on their being taught. To this end, then, it is important that what is organised for them is inviting, engaging and purposeful so what is learnt can be applied immediately to the work contexts – unlike a heavy focus on content that is typical in entry level training courses where learners need to acquire basic knowledge. A key reason being that worker learners are time-jealous (Billett, 2011b) and they constantly assess the outcomes they will achieve for the effort and time invested in learning. Moreover, it is they who often decide how they will respond to what is provided. Hence, it becomes necessary to consider their preferences for ways CET is organised and the types of pedagogical support that is afforded.
- iv) Finally, learning at work requires individuals to identify and create opportunities for new experiences through volunteering to engage in different activities, initiating new projects, negotiating varied tasks and responsibilities, or being innovative in ways to perform tasks or solve problems. Given that workplace environments are rarely structured for learning and most of the learning is informal (e.g. from other workers and personal experiences) (Eraut, 2004), workers need to be

made aware of work activities and pedagogical opportunities for learning. Thus, it becomes important to foster their agency as learners to both develop their competencies and also facilitate learning for co-workers.

The findings presented in this paper offer opportunities for CET providers to recognise and utilise, first, the contributions that workplaces offer and, second, those of experienced workers who can assist fellow workers with learning, and cultivate and sustain an on-going learning culture within the workplace. The expressed preferences of community services and health workers in this study call for a revisiting of current vocational education provisions that are primarily for entry level training and, as such, are limited for those engaging in continuing education and training.

Although based on 51 informants from the health and community services industry, the findings here are similar to what the samples from the mining, transport and logistics, service and finance industries have indicated in the larger study (Billett et al. 2012). These findings show that the informants expect learning offered by TET institutions to be more integrated with work tasks, to be based in work settings, and to be facilitated by TET experts, either in the form of direct support to individuals or groups than has been practised in the past. Finally, given that the workers constantly learn from more experienced others at work, it behoves TET providers to acknowledge this reality and to build on it in new and productive ways. Our findings show that an effective continuing education and training model for worker-learners in the aged care industry encompasses practice-based experiences supported by both formal and informal workplace arrangements.

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