Women, Work and Learning

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by

Jillian Maria Cavanagh

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from

School of Education and Professional Studies (Brisbane, Logan)

Faculty of Education

Griffith University

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Griffith University

Faculty of Education

Candidate’s Statement

I certify that this dissertation entitled ‘Women, Work and Learning’, submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education, is the result of my own work, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this dissertation (or any part of same) has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Signed: __________________________

Jillian Maria Cavanagh

Dated: __________________________
Abstract

Women, Work and Learning

Contemporary work is beset by changing laws, globalisation and technology. Such changes, together with the growing intensity of work, means work practices are constantly changing. Increasing numbers of women are entering into this work, often in contingent roles and many in administrative and service-related employment. Frequently, these contingent forms of work offer little in the way of career paths or support for ongoing learning and career development. This study investigates the work and learning experiences of a cohort of nine female auxiliary workers within the legal sector. These women are held to be illustrative of the growing ranks of contingent workers and their experiences in contemporary working life. The study examines the affordances for these women’s learning and levels of support available to them for participation in learning through their work.

The study is informed by a critical ethnographic approach that recounted the work and learning practices of these women through a series of structured interviews, observations and reflective journals written by both the participants and the researcher. This is interwoven with an autoethnography of the researcher’s work experiences within the legal workplace. Having advanced the case for learning through auxiliary kinds of work, the study describes and discusses three legal practice managers’ purposes of, conceptions about and practices for the learning of auxiliary legal workers in their legal practices. Next, it elaborates and discusses these women’s experiences of, conceptions about and practices to learn through their work. The literature dealing with aspects of the changing nature of work and contemporary issues affecting women at work such as power relations, the impact of policy, gender equity and discrimination illuminates the problems for these women workers. It also elaborates the nature of learning through work, and the self-identity and social identity of women at work and the notion of workplace knowledge within organisational practice.

How opportunities were afforded and maximised by these women was important as their learning was set within the structures of the workplace that served to inhibit their progress. Yet, these women needed to learn to perform
effectively and to retain their employment, and perhaps to progress. The women worked within an environment characterised by change and the findings of the study positioned each of them as committed workers and continuous, self-directed learners; that is, learning was fundamental to their everyday work and they shared a strong resolve to find ways to learn.

The study found strong and consistent evidence of personal epistemologies, reflexive practice and personal agency being exercised in the conduct of these women’s work and learning. Through these processes, the women developed a sense of their own identity at work as workers and learners and they enacted those identities. Yet, all this was found, to be necessitated by and in the face of low workplace affordance for their work and learning. That is, formal learning policies and programs were not readily accessible to auxiliary level women at work. However, the study suggests that if these women were offered opportunities to participate in formal learning programs at work they would probably do so. It was concluded that improvement in the workplace norms, values and practices associated with contingent workers, such as these nine auxiliary legal workers, was needed, firstly, for the legal practices to enact policies, procedures and opportunities for auxiliary level staff to participate in kinds of learning that promote professional and self development and, secondly, for auxiliary level women to be aware of, to learn and to participate in new ways to practice and to strive for professional and self development. Overall, this study illustrated how workplace policies and practices can work against the needs, learning and aspirations of workers, who perform essential support and service roles, yet are not seen as being central to workplace success. Interactive collaborations between workplace managers and contingent workers are needed to continually find new ways to help these workers change and grow at work within workplace environments that are invitational for them.

In all, the study found that the agency and personal epistemologies of these auxiliary workers was essential in their negotiation of learning, the enactment of peer support and to necessarily cross boundaries of practice in learning and working. While such agency is commendable, it is held that this agency might be deployed more productively in workplaces, if it were not
continually having to be exercised to overcome the low invitational qualities of the very workplaces in which they work and learn.
Acknowledgements

A study of this kind was not accomplished alone; this was a journey, filled with support from many remarkable people who have influenced this research project and also my life:

To Associate Professor Stephen Billett, I am most appreciative for his academic expertise, leadership and inspiring supervision. His advice was always sound and he was the steady hand and strong partisan of my labours.

Dr Maree Boyle provided me with a female balance in perspectives, and always stirred in me a level of enthusiasm to move forward with my study.

Without the nine wonderful women, who were willing to take part in this study, it would not have been possible. I am truly grateful to each of them for openly sharing their personal lives and workplace experiences. At times these women waivered between vulnerability and strength, and they taught me that with personal epistemologies, reflexivity and agency we can all succeed, even in the face of adversity.

To the practice managers who allowed me into their offices, I am indebted to each of them for their generosity of time, professionalism and integrity. Even though I had spent over twenty years working within legal practices I found our in-depth conversations to be more enlightening than anticipated.

There were many other fellow RHD students, academics and friends with whom I shared discussion, debate, tears and laughter. Often, when the way was dark and difficult they guided me towards the ‘evidence’. Their insight and friendship made the journey easier.

Lastly, I want to thank my family for their patience and support; especially my son Adam for believing in me, and Sarah who is an aide memoire that daughters are precious.
Dedication:

This thesis is dedicated to Molly-Rose Ankonina
- for it is she, at the age of 5, who will shape the future.
  And to the memory of
  Molly Brady Collins and
  Emily Bowcock Browne (my grandmothers)
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<table>
<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>Affirmative Action Act</td>
<td>AAA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affirmative Action Policy</td>
<td>AAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Institute of Family Studies</td>
<td>AIFS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boyd Law</td>
<td>BL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services</td>
<td>CDFCS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Legal Education</td>
<td>CLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Professional Development</td>
<td>CPD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act</td>
<td>EOWWA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Education and Training Policy</td>
<td>FETP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilston Law</td>
<td>GL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macarthur Law</td>
<td>ML</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership Categorisation Devices</td>
<td>MCD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Training Reform Agenda</td>
<td>NTRA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the Status of Women</td>
<td>OSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex Discrimination Act</td>
<td>SDA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Education and Training</td>
<td>VET</td>
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