Workplace learning in small business and VET: re writing the rule book or rewriting the rules of engagement?

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ABSTRACT

Jennings, Perren and Carter (2005) have argued for ‘paradigmatic pluralism’ in the entrepreneurship research and policy discourses. Entrepreneurial learning in small business has been critiqued on a continuum from reactive, single loop learning, to anticipatory, double loop learning, but mostly through an institutional, skills deficit, as opposed to appreciative inquiry focus. This difficult to quantify, informal ‘workplace learning’ is often overlooked through functionalist lenses, reinforcing existing power relationships and hegemonies intent on engaging grassroots industry more formally in the broader policy objectives of lifelong learning, workforce development, and social inclusion. There is a need to debate these dominant discourses of workplace learning though, within the ‘organisational ecology’ of the heterogeneous small business world. Both Vocational Education and Training (VET) and small business are subjugated to global capital in a deregulated, neo liberalist market economy, which can be capacity reducing in the regions, as opposed to capacity building. It could be argued there is no comparable, ecumenical framework within VET to accredit the total contribution, or investment in people by small business to regional communities. In this light, how can workforce development and social contribution in small businesses become more visible in the policy debate? This paper will discuss findings from a qualitative PhD research study in regional South Australia, and conclude with suggestions for redefining the value of entrepreneurial learning to VET and participation in lifelong learning by small business, and promulgate the shift to a model of sustainable entrepreneurship in the small firm workplace.

Introduction: revisiting the value of entrepreneurial learning to VET?

There has been contention in the research over the last two decades about small and micro business contribution or conversely, lack of contribution, to the human capital development of the individual. Also much debate too, about the extent to which government intervention in the training market for small business is effective in increasing innovation, productivity and economic growth, and reducing small firm failure. (Baker and Wooden 1995, Matlay, 1997, 1999, Field, 1998, a, b, Gibb, 1999, Keep, 1999, Blandy and Freeland, 2000; Kearney, 2000, Kilpatrick and Bell, 2000, Moy and Mcdonald, 2000, Billett, 2001, Cully, 2002, Hall, Buchanan and Considine, 2002, Wren and Storey, 2002, Smith and Billett, 2003, Storey, 2004). De Geus (1997, p, 18) contends success for companies lies in their capacity to learn and this may be their only competitive edge for survival. Matlay (2002, 1999, 1998.) has found disconcertingly, most small firm learning in the UK is reactive, with small business needing to adopt a culture of proactive learning in the workplace. He contends skills levels in small business have not kept pace with accelerating changes in the economy. In this light, understanding the role for VET in enculturing entrepreneurship is paramount for innovation and creativity in the regions. (OECD, 2005, 2004, Hindle and O’Connor, 2004, European Commission 2004). Hindle (2005, p.3) contends existing education and training practices misperceive entrepreneurship education though, and the need for initiatives which cultivate entrepreneurial capacities, for Australia to lift its “middle of the international road status”.
This needs to be underpinned by more independent critique from within the VET research which ‘recontextualises’ entrepreneurial learning, and innovation in the small business workplace, and redefines the relationship between entrepreneurial capacity or ‘entrepreneurial capital’ (Audretsch and Keilbach, 2004) and regional economic development.

Over twenty years ago, Jamieson (1984) suggested a three category framework for entrepreneurship education and distinguished between education about enterprise, education for enterprise and education in enterprise. (Jamieson 1984, in Henry, Hill and Leitch 2005, a, p. 101.). This paper revisits Jamieson’s (1984) third category and discusses entrepreneurial workplace learning within the ‘organisational ecology’ of the small business from the perspective of the established small firm owner, and VET practitioners. It is work in progress from a PhD study ‘revoicing’ the narratives of practitioners and small business within the functionalist policy debate by ‘critiquing’ a theoretical construct of learning ecologies, or ‘alternative capitals’ for a sustainable development model of learning partnerships. (Plane, 2001; 2002a, b, 2003a, b; 2004 a, b, 2005.) Small business is defined as the owner managed small (i.e. 6-19 employees) or micro workplace (1-5 employees) respectively. Practitioners are those working in VET, Adult and Community Education (ACE), regional development, local government, libraries, information services and small business support services. The organisational ecology, in this context, is the entrepreneurial capital of the small business owner operator and its human resources, as a capacity for enculturing workplace learning and regional innovation. The paper reviews the international and local literature on entrepreneurship and the effectiveness of VET for preparing small business owner’s for a world of ‘permanent white water’ (Vaill, 1996). This literature suggests opposing, contradictory views on the value of formal VET to small firm economic growth and success. The argument questions the impact of the VET pedagogy and discourses on encouraging more participation in workforce development and social contribution by small and micro businesses, and how the small firm can become more equitably represented in the policy debate. It finds there are alternative discourses, which dispute the dominant ‘epistemologies of knowing’ and predominant rules of engagement in learning for small firms, and for the holistic development of entrepreneurial skills through blending formal, informal and non formal learning in the workplace. The recommendation argues for rethinking the economic rationalist paradigm, which consistently situates small business within the ‘politics of the disengaged’ and for redefining learning for sustainable entrepreneurship. It concludes with suggestions for repositioning the value of entrepreneurial learning in the workplace within VET, and redefining participation in lifelong learning within the policy debate.

Repositioning the smaller voice in the debate?

Billett (2004) has critiqued the changing face of industry involvement in VET in Australia over the last twenty years and its reluctance to participate initially, to the predominance since the 1980s, of industry being the key driver of the training market. Billett (2004) contends that the Australian National Training Agenda (2004- 2010) is positioned as accountable to one voice only, and that whilst the larger, corporate voice has been dominant in VET, it has been considerably quieter on the understanding of ‘salient educational processes’ (Billett 2004, p. 14). Within this ‘economic discourse’ the VET marketplace is open to survival of the fittest, but as Billett (2004) and Keep (1999) contend ‘the invisible hand’ is not performing well in a ‘voluntarist’ marketplace, and “unfortunately, business has failed to champion the significance, richness and complexity of vocational knowledge or vocational education as a worthwhile endeavour” (Billett 2004, p.27). For the small business sector,
comprising of 1.27 million small firms, which employ two out of five people in the private sector in Australia, (NATSEM, 2005, 3) a challenge is in maintaining its stakehold in the economy between larger business and the corporates. Fuller (2003, p.305) has contended small business has been ‘systematically othered’ and is in a weak position relative to larger corporations, but is also co dependent on them. It has been suggested that learning and skills development in VET is being defined by large industry alone, with the knowledge base of nations being dictated by short term skills fixes to meet industry needs (Cornford, 2005, Schofield 2003, Mannion Brunt, 1999, Hopkins, 1999; Keep, 1999). Billett (2004, p.29) contending that for small business: ”...it seems that the very educational processes and practices promoted by business are antithetical to the needs of a significant sector of the Australian economy.” There is a need for more research which redefines the meaning of ‘capitals and capabilities’ outside formal VET within this economic discourse, to underpin policies for workforce development, sustainable development and social inclusion. (Schuller, Bynner and Feinstein, 2004). Fuller et al (2003) too, have attempted to make more explicit the links between informal learning and economic productivity.

Redefining participation by small business in VET?

Central to this discussion is the need for redefining participation by small business and repositioning the learning taking place in the small firm workplace as valuable to VET. Much of the debate is focused on measuring only formal accredited participation and addressing the return on investment for industry. This work laments the findings on the lack of investment and predominant culture of inherent disinterest in the formal national training agenda of the day by small business. It is argued, that this subsequent lack of contribution to formal VET has a matched detrimental impact on regional capacity in workforce development, and economic productivity. Measuring contribution to VET by small business to formal training is problematic though. (Richardson, 2004, Kearney, 2000, Kearns, 2002, Cully, 2002, Blandy and Freeland 2000, Billett, 2001). Smith and Billett (2004) find that in comparison to OECD countries, it is not conclusive that small firms in Australia spend less on VET than their counterparts overseas, and the motives for increasing small business participation in VET are questionable. In their view, encouraging small business may be more about to attempts to bolster falling public investment in VET infrastructure, and less about capacity building in communities. Johnson (2002, p 287) argues the extent to which the issue is defined as a ‘problem” depends on the definitions and measures used. The more formal and quantitative a measure of small business, he writes, the more negative a picture of training participation is presented. When the definition is broadened to encompass the learning on the job, the gap between small and larger business participation in VET reduces (Johnson, 2002, p 287- 288). Johnson (2002) argues that from the perspective of the firm, informally training in the workplace makes the most rational sense for the firm -but not necessarily for workforce development. Malcolm, Hodkinson, and Colley (2003) have argued formal and informal training both have value, and that formal training has aspects of informality, and informal training can become formalised, and the need for blending both approaches. In their view, polarising VET into these two distinct aspects of learning is an outdated argument, and not helpful: “The challenge is to recognise and identify them and to understand the implications”. (Malcolm, Hodkinson and Colley 2003, p. 315) Smith et al (2003, p.46) have stated the focus for VET now should not be on attempting to increase formal participation by small firms, but improving the quality and effectiveness of the learning already taking place in the workplace. Patton and Marlow (2002, p.261) finding:

“Diffuse forms of knowledge and skill accumulation should not be ignored because they are outside the measurable template of formality”.
Reframing a pluralist research paradigm?

A key barrier though for moving forward is there is no space in the debate for alternative discourses of contribution to VET from outside institutional walls, which is controversial, when this sector of the economy is larger than the formal VET system (Dumbrell 2004). Cornford, (2005) has argued for more independent critique in the VET research, as evidence for policy planning and implementation. Hisrich and Drnovsek (2002, p 175) in an analysis of small business research publication in the USA and Europe, have found though there has been ‘a paradigmatic bias towards functionalism’ in the small business published literature. Jennings, Perren and Carter (2005, p 180) too, have called for a ‘paradigmatic pluralism’ in the entrepreneurship research and policy discourses contending that: “Voice of small business is a discourse of (un) representation that subjugates entrepreneurs so they become voice-less and are treated as dependents that must be spoken for like the worst portrayal of children.” (Jennings, Perren and Carter 2005, p.180). They argue these functional sub texts have removed the possibility of small firms creating personal agency, and rendered them subjugated, ignoring the unequal power relationships within the political discourses. In this international research, opposing views discuss the extent to which government should intervene in small business and the capacity of VET to increase economic productivity and growth, and to reduce small firm failure and it is to that we now turn.

Reducing small firm failure through intervention- an impossible ‘ask’ for VET?

It is often premised intervention through VET at any point in the small firm life cycle will automatically equate with better productivity and growth. There is a need to question the extent VET alone can prepare small business owners in entrepreneurial skills for survival in a chaotic, high risk, unpredictable marketplace. Culkin and Smith (2000, p 145) find government intervention into small business to improve the effectiveness of the small business sector can be misplaced and is often ‘based on a flawed understanding of how small firms actually operate”. Johnson (2002) quotes Storey and Westhead (1997, 1994) and for the need for caution in making automatic assumptions about VET and its impact on firm success. Davies, Hides and Powell (2002, p 407) doubting whether even a degree in business management prepares a person for the entrepreneurial environment of a small business. Storey and Westhead (2004) have debated whether there should be a policy for small business at all, and whether governments should intervene in the marketplace. Findings from this study argued that the impact of VET intervention was greater for small to medium sized enterprises, than for small business. No firm conclusions can be drawn as to whether a high growth business will benefit from VET and also how to target the intervention to such a heterogeneous sector of the economy. Kempnich, Butler and Billett (1999, p.5) quote Childs (1997, p.17) who found that business failure is often beyond the control of the small business owner. Everett and Watson (1998) stating there are both exogenous and endogenous causes of failure and defining the failure of the firm is open to interpretation, and that judgments about cause and effect can only be determined by those closest to the crisis. In this study, between 30-50% of small business closures were due to the exogenous or external influences from the economy. Intervention through VET may not be enough, without addressing the macroeconomic factors impacting on small firm survival. A finding echoed in Beaver, (2003, p.118) who contends for small firms: “this key characteristic dominates the policy agenda”. The question may not be to intervene or not to intervene, but how best to intervene and at what point in the small firm lifecycle to enculture the common ground and space for discussion for promulgating learning partnerships?
Revisiting andragogy for entrepreneurship training in small business?

There is another discourse though which disputes whether VET can adequately prepare a person for entrepreneurship, in what Vaill (1996) terms a world of ‘permanent white water’ and whether or not entrepreneurship can actually be taught (Johnson, 2002, Culkin and Smith, 2002, Downing, 2005, Henry, Hill and Leitch, a,b 2005; Ibrahim, and Soufani, 2002). Lewis and Massey (2003, p 197) have contended the knowledge economy depends on developing enterprising individuals. A difficulty lies in that there is no clear definition of what is meant by entrepreneurship in small business to determine what role VET might play in supporting that innovation. Breen (2004, p 21) finds the terms enterprise and entrepreneurship are open to interpretation, and in Australia at least, the word ‘entrepreneur’ has negative connotations. Hamilton and Harper (1994) in Davies, Hides and Powell (2002, p 406) define an entrepreneur as someone “who exploits and invention or technological possibility in an environment which is adventure and risk inherent”. Davies, Hides and Powell, 2002 p, 406) quote Bygrave (1998) who wrote: “…entrepreneurs are people who show initiative, imagination, creativity and flexibility” and also Parston (1998) who finds they “deliver results beyond their capabilities”. The OECD, (2005, p 10) state there is no one single model for teaching entrepreneurship. Raffo et al (2000) concluded that for the small firm owner VET is too pedagogic, and the need to change the rules of engagement. In their view, an andragogic (Knowles, 1984) approach for small firms is preferable. Although in theory, institutions are professing to encourage adult learning, in practice, a culture of pedagogy means a missed opportunity for small business and VET. Coulson- Thomas (2004, p 84-93, 89) finds entrepreneurship is not actively supported by formal training systems, many formal courses have passed their ‘sell by date” and focus on monitoring that which is known. Fenwick (2003, p 2) contends we do not have comprehensive theories for learning processes in practice based innovation. Like Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2005), Fenwick (2003) questions whether rationalistic approaches, or an over reliance on what they term ‘calculative rationality’ is counter productive and stifles the creativity needed for innovation.

Revaluing ‘knowing’ in entrepreneurial learning

Perhaps thankfully, a redeeming feature of the free market economy is that there is always opposition, and it comes from the workplace learning discourses which argue for an alternative perspective. This debate attempts to reposition and resituate the value of ‘entrepreneurial logic’, or entrepreneurial knowing, in the workplace context. (Cunningham, Gerrard, Schoch and Lai Hong 2002, Deakins and Freeland, 1998, Cope, 2000, 2003, Down 1999, Downing 2005, Rae, 2005, 2004, Rae and Carswell 2001). Field (2002) has called too for a radical change from thinking about ‘training” to learning in the small workplace. Schofield (2003) argues for a ‘skills ecosystems’ focus in small business including the networks, clusters and informal learning alliances used on a daily basis in the firm. Boud (2003) suggests the need to address ‘whose discourse we are in’ to be able to rediscover cultural descriptions of how learning is experienced in the workplace. Beckett and Hager (2002, 1997) and Beckett (2001) advocate for a redefinition of the 'practical wisdom' gained in the workplace and Hopkins (1998) a shift from an 'epistemology of knowledge to an epistemology of practice’. Culkin and Smith (2000, p 155.) find although small businesses may be regarded as simplistic, much grounded knowledge is embedded in the owner operator. Rae (2005, 2004) and Rae and Carswell, (2001) have taken a discursive, social constructionist approach to understanding entrepreneurial decision making, and practice based theory within the firm. By listening to small business owner’s stories, practical experience, and ‘praxis’, they conclude this is how entrepreneurs make sense of their world
around them. This ‘phronesis’ (Beckett and Hager, 1997) or life story research, (Rae, 2005, 2004, Rae and Carswell, 2001; Cope 2000, 2003, 2005.) is a powerful situated theory and in this light, small business learning can be understood from the communities of practice perspective (Wenger, 1998).

Research Method

The research is adopting qualitative techniques of appreciative enquiry and asset mapping (Kenyon and Black et al. 2001; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993) with semi structured interviews, with practitioners and small business (Piantinida and Garman 1999; Guba and Lincoln 1989, Rubin and Rubin, 1995). One hundred and twenty interviews have been undertaken with people from both the-for-profit, and not-for-profit sectors. The researcher has adopted what Rubin and Rubin (1995) term ‘conversational partners’ as interview style, to be a least intrusive as possible to all parties. Interviews have been taped, transcribed and returned to all interviewees for correction and verification. Transcripts have been analysed and coded for confidentiality with key labels and identifiers to assist verification of predominant themes in the texts and also to isolate the absence of comment. It is acknowledged that any regional case study analysis has limitations, but may offer new interpretations about learning partnerships with the small organisation and capacity building with VET.

Research Questions

1. What types of small business, VET, community partnerships are in evidence in this region now and why? What purpose do they serve?

2. What capabilities and capacities comprise a learning partnership and how integral are these for the sustainable development of the region?

3. Where are the enablers and barriers for a social partnerships model of sustainable development in a globalising, mixed market economy of VET?

4. What are the implications for engaging VET, small business and the community in learning partnerships in this particular region for the future? Where are there opportunities? Where are there threats?

5. What kinds of change management practices would need to be instigated in VET, the community and small business and at what level of governance, to enable progress towards a learning region?

6. To what extent can social partnerships enculture democratic processes for lifelong learning and sustainable development and reduce the impact of neoclassical economic paradigms on VET, small business and the community?

Findings: Re writing the rule book and rewriting the rules of engagement?

For the reader, a more detailed analysis of narratives from small businesses and practitioners can be found in Plane, (2002a, b, 2003a, b; 2004 a, b, 2005). From the organisational ecology perspective there is disparity between practitioner’s perceptions of what small business owner’s need from VET and the perspectives of the small business owner’s
themselves. This point of difference centres on how expertise and skill is positioned in the discourses and ‘whose knowing’ is deemed more valuable for developing entrepreneurial qualities and success in small business. This contention is fuelled by the inescapable reliance in VET on codified, transferable knowledge systems of training for risk aversion and compliance, as the predominant management strategy for small business, as opposed to learning for empowerment for creativity, growth and entrepreneurial development. Within the constraints of this VET pedagogy, practitioners spoke of the integral place for business planning in reducing trial and error and for ‘building the learning in at the front end’. Yet few established small business owners had a formal business plan and placed emphasis or value on its usefulness for operating the small firm in an environment one referred to as ‘the university of hard knocks and surprises.’ and another, where formal business plans ‘were out of date in six months and useless’. Formal bureaucracies do not cope well with diversity or discontinuous change and there is still the tendency for VET to situate experienced small businesses as one homogenous mass, at one learning level, where as one small business owner said: ‘It’s pitched too low’ and another: ‘I don’t know what it could possibly offer me’

So how do small business owners develop knowledge schemas for a workplace culture dominated by white water rapids, where one person quoted in Vaill (1996) contended: “you write the rule book as you go”? Watkins and Bazerman (2003, p 74.) have critiqued the notion of ‘predictable surprises’ in the organisation and extent to which they can be prevented by management ‘recognising, reacting, prioritising and mobilising’ action. Day, Mckay, Ishman and Chung (2004) have argued it’s almost impossible however, to anticipate a crisis unless it has been experienced personally, but paradoxically, not all firms learn from the experience. In reality, operating a small business is not only extremely labour intensive, it is also people intensive, where people and their behaviour can be very unpredictable, both inside and outside the firm. Much learning in the small firm is about managing crises and unpredictability- called or uncalled for, or as one business owner put it bluntly, learning which is: ‘gut wrenching’, anticipating the worst possible scenario, and acting on it swiftly in damage control mode. In this context, experienced small business owner’s use emotive, deeply situated learning as a capability to prevent a crisis, limit the depth of the crisis, recover from the crisis quickly, and anticipatory learning to be ready for the next one. Perhaps this resilience, tenacity and capacity for survival and navigating ‘white water learning’ are what define a successful entrepreneur. “It can be trial and error” one said- but it’s expensive.” Illeris (2003) has argued that all learning has a social, emotional and cognitive component. Cope (2000, 2003, 2005.) contends critical incident learning in small firms has the capacity to stimulate higher level learning. In this light, the VET debate should be less about disengagement from lifelong learning, and more about repositioning this triple loop, entrepreneurial capability within VET frameworks, to prepare nascent small businesses and the next generation of small business owner’s for discontinuous change, and to manage what can be the cognitive, social and emotive overload of learning in the firm workplace context.

Discussion: a shift in policy for learning partnerships in VET?

There are tensions for developing successful learning partnerships when both VET and small business are subjugated to global capital in a deregulated, neo liberalist market economy, which can be capacity reducing in the regions, as opposed to capacity building. Within this cost benefit analysis paradigm the main argument has been to locate the source of dissent with the small firm, within ‘the ‘politics disengagement’. It could be contended the dominant discourses of knowing and skill have disenfranchised the very group of employers VET wishes to engage more fully, that have the capacity to influence workforce development.
Within the small business world, endogenous pressures, and exogenous stresses from the macroeconomic climate impact on decisions about participation in anything outside the firm, - not just formal VET. Intervention by VET may not be seen as a panacea by small business to their challenges. For the established firm has VET become another functionalist system for enculturing risk averse, small business managers as opposed to innovative entrepreneurs? In the current regulatory culture is VET restricted to developing compliance, as opposed to creative small businesses focussed on growth and productivity? It is paradoxical a globalising, economic rationalist system of VET governance which should assist small business development, in theory, might be counter productive to entrepreneurial success in the regions, in practice. Within this paradigm, just as the certainties of VET intervention in the small firm marketplace are contestable, so is the need to make less tenuous the link between learning in the workplace and productivity and growth. Also to temper the disempowering pedagogy of training for audit and compliance by valuing the ‘entrepreneurial andragogy’ and creative capital (Florida, 2002) in small business for regional economic development. For this to happen there needs to be a shift at the policy level:

From

Neoclassical
Positivist empiricist
Skills deficit
Top down centralist
Governance from afar
Mismatched policy
Formal Training Agenda push
Focus on policy
Pedagogic
Feudal
Negative positioning
Focus on debt reduction
Focus on economic capital
Voiceless unvoiced
Skills shortages
Short term planning
Partnerships as economic resource
Intervention with training
Centralist
Functionalist institutional
We know best
Deregulation of industry
Politics of guilt
Othered, marginalised
Hierarchical power relationships
Community or business
Business or environment
Corporatist, fiscal
Disengaged discourse
Measuring investment
Dominance of the formal

To

Social humanist
Critical social inquiry
Asset mapping
Revaluing, legitimising at the local
Transparency, local government
Cohesion at regional level
Repositioning workplace knowing
Focus on people and community
Andragogic
Participatory
Appreciative enquiry,
Focus on education as a resource
Focus on all capitals as a resource
Voiced within policy debate
Utilising existing lifewide skills
Strategic and focussed, long term
Partnerships to build skills and expertise
Better results from learning taking place
Community development approach
Organisational, individual, collective
How can we work and learn with you?
Review of impacts on small industry
Politics of value and appreciation
Social inclusion
Horizontally integrated
Community and business
Business and environment
Triple bottom line
Renegotiating agency
Revaluing contribution
Blending the formal and the informal
meritocratic accreditation | Revaluing contextualised, workplace learning
big business focus | small organisational focus
distrust | trust
top down | bottom up - feeding back
silos divisiveness | learning partnerships

A mirrored shift to sustainable entrepreneurship in small business?

But there needs to be a mirrored shift too, in the small business sector to a culture of learning for sustainable entrepreneurship; that which takes into the equation the triple bottom line and responsible role that small business plays in the regions and the impact of business mismanagement and failure on local communities. There has been much discussion about how the mantra of economic growth at all costs needs contesting with a new paradigm for developing democratic, civic society through sustainable development and equitable governance in the regions. (De Woot, 2005, Buchholz and Rosenthal, 2004, Beer, Maude and Pritchard, 2003; Birch, 2001, Warburton, 2004; Wackernagel and Rees 1996) Ellyard (1998) has questioned the ethical integrity of business and what entrepreneurship and sustainable development should look like for the future. In his opinion, there is a need for ‘greening the marketplace’ and systems that produce socially responsible ‘cosmonauts’ in industry as opposed to systems that produce ‘cowboys’. Beaver and Jennings (2005, p 9, 20) have written of the dangers to the community of the ‘relentless drive for personal achievement’ of the small firm owner as key decision maker, and the results of the dark side of entrepreneurship which can be selfish, egotistical and destructive. There is a need to find the balance in socially responsible stakeholder capitalism and corporate citizenship to offset entrepreneurialism at its worst in an unfettered market economy. Finding different ways of measuring the extent to which employers contribute to VET and a more accurate picture of that contribution is necessary, as evidenced in the findings of Richardson (2004). Also developing a better understanding of the ways in which Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is being ‘encultured’ or not, by employers in the workplace. This will be debated elsewhere, but Chinien et al (2003) have developed indicators for integrating ESD in the workplace. Fenwick (2000, p 8) has found entrepreneurs do talk about ‘nourishing work community’ and “ethical integrity before profit”. Beaver and Jennings (2005, p.21) contend the small firm owner operator is immensely powerful in instilling values and setting the workplace culture of their firm. This shift to a sustainable entrepreneurial model, one which considers the broad stakeholder concerns for the regions, but acknowledges the space for the firm to grow a different kind of innovation and creativity outside VET, might help to redress the mismatch and imbalance.

In summary, there is a need to build stronger alliances and resilient relationships across the sectors for reconciliation which focus on more than just the economic contribution to regional communities. There is evidence learning partnerships with small business are seen by both practitioners and small business as predominantly for corporate sponsorship for regional infrastructure only, and less about developing learning alliances through the other capitals: personal, human, social, intellectual, and organisational. Increasing the established small business owner’s visibility in ‘third way’ (Giddens, 2001, 1998) ‘can do policies’ of sustainable development, workforce development, social contribution and learning partnerships needs to commence with a clearer understanding of what they already ‘do’ and build on that contribution. Rendering invisible the ‘white water learning’ experience of small firm owners within the discourses of VET participation, and positioning this informal ‘knowing’ as less valid is counter productive for developing alliances and learning
partnerships with the small firm. There is the danger that in positioning small firms as disengaged, formalising learning in the small workplace, and consistently foisting the VET agenda, and another culture of audit and compliance, on a heterogeneous, diverse sector of the economy, as the only solution to problems which cannot be solved by increasing participation in VET alone, the very creative capital (Florida, 2002) so integral to economic development and innovation of the regions, will be diminished. A profound and damaging resulting outcome for improved business community relations and reconciliation across the political spectrum, counter productive and diametrically opposed to promulgating learning partnerships for workforce development, social inclusion and sustainable development, and what the National Training Agenda for VET in Australia is attempting to achieve.

**Conclusion**

The paper has questioned the impact of the popular discourses of small business on encouraging participation in formal VET and how workforce development and social contribution by small and micro businesses can become more equitably represented in the policy debate. The literature suggests opposing, contradictory views on the value of formal VET to entrepreneurs, small firm economic growth and success, and raises questions about the holistic development of entrepreneurial skills through blending formal, informal and non formal learning in the workplace. It finds there are alternative discourses within the debate which dispute the dominant epistemologies of knowing and rules on defining engagement in learning for small firms. The recommendation argues for a rethinking of the current emphasis on consistently positioning small business within the ‘politics of the disengaged’ in the predominant economic rationalist paradigm, and for defining learning for sustainable entrepreneurship as central to VET. This change demands a shift in workplace culture on both sides of the debate; a reappraising and redefinition of contribution to VET by small business, a shift to entrepreneurship with triple bottom line conscience in the firm, and to understand that VET with its current restraints, may not be best positioned itself to provide all the answers for small business success.

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Appendix A Capacity building for sustainable development and learning communities in VET?

This working model suggests a strategy and process for building capacities and capability for lifelong learning and sustainable development in VET through cross-sectoral learning partnerships for a learning community (Plane, 2001). Each capacity based ecology being essential for an equitable learning partnership and sustainable learning community. Whilst represented here in theory, simplistically and as discrete segments of a learning community for the purposes of critical analysis of learning partnerships, in practice, all are complimentary, integrated and amorphous with the relationships between them being extremely complex. All need resourcing, whether through public private partnerships, government intervention, NGO’s or through the private sector, or in the community.

This paper is ‘work in progress’ from a PhD study and presents findings as they pertain to the ‘organisational ecology’ from observation, asset mapping, field work and interviews undertaken with practitioners and providers of learning and services to small business and with small businesses in the Adelaide Hills. Their input, time and participation are acknowledged in this paper. Thanks to supervisor Professor Roger Harris and CREEW, University of South Australia. Also to the Office of Regional Affairs South Australia for the opportunity to participate in regional study tours.