Local perspectives on globalisation and learning: A case-study of the printing and packaging industry in south west England

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## Contents

Introduction: globalisation from Raymond Williams to Manuel Castells

The structure of the print industry in the south west of England

Skills, divisions of labour and union activities in the print industry

The work of the GPMU on skills and training in the context of the Trade Union Learning Fund (TULF)

Will employers ever learn?

Formal and informal learning in the print industry

Conclusions: Local labour and global capital

References

Acknowledgements
Introduction: globalisation from Raymond Williams to Manuel Castells

There was this Englishman who worked in the London office of a multinational corporation based in the United States. He drove home one evening in his Japanese car. His wife, who worked in a firm which imported German kitchen equipment, was already at home. Her small Italian car was often quicker through the traffic. After a meal which included New Zealand lamb, Californian carrots, Mexican honey, French cheese and Spanish wine, they settled down to watch a programme on their television set, which had been made in Finland. The programme was a retrospective celebration of the war to recapture the Falkland Islands. As they watched it they felt warmly patriotic, and proud to be British. (Williams, 1983a.177)

the globalization thesis ignores the persistence of the nation state and the crucial role of government in influencing the structure and dynamics of the new economy.’ (Castells, 1996.97)

As both Williams and Castells have noted, we live in an economy organised at a global level, but in which culture, ideology and politics are largely organised at a national and local level. Communities, one might say, organise, capitalism disorganises:

Yet it is capitalism, especially in its most developed stages, which is the main source of all the contemporary confusions about peoples and nations and their necessary loyalties and bonds. Moreover it is, in the modern epoch, capitalism which has disrupted and overridden natural communities, and imposed artificial orders. (Williams, 1983a.184)

Williams stresses that the struggle for control over culture and politics cannot and should not be divorced from the struggle for control over the globalised economy, and for the replacement of the current emphasis on ‘production’ in capitalist discourse by an emphasis on ‘livelihood’:

The old orientation of raw material for production is rejected, and in its place there is the new orientation of livelihood: of practical, self-managing, self-renewing societies, in which people care first for each other, in a living world. (Williams, 1983b.266)

In this paper, I shall propose that both enterprises and their employees (especially through the structures of the trade union movement) can and do position themselves effectively vis-à-vis changes in the global economy, despite the best efforts of non-representative bodies such as the IMF and WTO to remove entirely remaining constraints on the activities of globalised financial capital. The idea that only culture and ideology (as opposed to economics) can be dealt with at a national and local level is essentially disempowering and pessimistic.
Castells makes a number of precise points about globalisation which are relevant to this case-study of the print industry in the south west of England:

1. The global economy is an economy of variable geometry:
The global economy does not embrace all economic processes in the planet, it does not include all territories, and it does not include all people in its workings, although it does affect directly or indirectly the livelihood of the entire humankind. While its effects reach out to the whole planet, *its actual operation and structure concern only segments of economic structures, countries, and regions, in proportions that vary according to the particular position of a country or region in the international division of labor.* (Castells, 1996.102) (emphasis in original)

While most economic activity, and most jobs in the world are national, regional, or even local, the core, strategic economic activities are globally integrated in the Information Age through electronically enacted networks of exchange of capital, commodities, and information. (Castells, 1998.318)

2. Globalisation favours small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) employing less than 200 employees, but they may be more closely tied into large multinational corporations than appears at first sight:

Thus, at the same time, it is true that small and medium businesses appear to be forms of organization well adapted to the flexible production system of the informational economy, and it is also true that their renewed dynamism comes under the control of large corporations that remain at the center of the structure of economic power in the new global economy. (Castells, 1996.156)

3. Inequalities of globalisation are more likely to persist from previous labour markets than to be specific to globalisation:

Thus, while there are certainly signs of social and economic polarization in advanced societies, they do not take the form of divergent paths in the occupational structure, but of different positions of similar occupations across sectors and between firms. Sectoral, territorial, firm-specific, and gender / ethnic / age characteristics are clearer sources of social polarization than occupational differences per se. (Castells, 1996.220)

4. The full potential of information technologies may require new management styles to release its potential:

The broader and deeper the diffusion of advanced information technology in factories and offices, the greater the need for an autonomous, educated worker able and willing to program and decide entire sequences of work. Notwithstanding the formidable obstacles of authoritarian management and exploitative capitalism, information technologies call for greater freedom for better-informed workers to deliver the full promise of its productivity potential. (Castells, 1996.241/242)

5. Education determines the key distinction between ‘generic’ and ‘self-programming’ labour:
Education (as distinct from the warehousing of children and students) is the process by which people, that is labor, acquire the capability constantly to redefine the necessary skills for a given task, and to access the sources for learning those skills. (Castells, 1996.341)

The structure of the print industry in the south west of England

There are methodological problems associated with attempting to give basic information about this industry. Official statistics sometimes link printing with publishing, sometimes with packaging, sometimes with both. The case-study reported in this paper refers to an initiative by the trade union Graphical Paper and Media Union (GPMU) Wessex Branch which includes part of the south west region (Dorset) but also part of south east England (Hampshire). It is not possible in a paper of this length to do full justice to all of the sub-regional and industrial sub-sector variations.

In relation to ownership, Vidler's 1999 study for the South West Trades Union Congress (TUC) highlighted the two faces of globalisation in the print industry. On the one hand, economic globalisation combined with the ability to transfer electronically information files for printing around the globe has meant that some successful SMEs have been acquired by multinationals. On the other hand, new technology and the growth of ‘instant’ copy and print facilities means there are new niche opportunities for very small firms serving very local markets:

The twin influences of globalisation and technological change are having a significant impact on structure and ownership in manufacturing. Transnational companies are growing rapidly especially by acquisition of successful SMEs while at the same time more accessible technologies have created greater opportunities for the growth of small businesses meeting the needs of local and specialist markets. This trend is exemplified by developments in the printing and publishing industry in which technological change tends to exceed that predicted, placing an immense pressure on the need for constant updating and training. (Vidler, 1999.8)

Smallbone et al (1999) analysed developments in printing and publishing in three English regions (south west, London, Yorkshire and Humberside) between 1991 and 1996. This suggests that 8% of total employment in UK publishing, printing and reprographic media was located in the south west counties of Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Gloucestershire and Dorset (including Bristol, a major centre for these industries). Employment had grown overall by 5.9% during 1991-96 to 26,492. These figures are comparable to other areas overall, but mask regional differences. For example, publishing jobs had risen by 7% in the south west compared with 12% in London, while printing jobs were up by 6% in the south west compared with a fall of 8% in London; in the smaller ‘other reprographic’ sector (sound, video and
computers) a fall of 42% in the south west compared with an actual increase of 200% in London (Smallbone et al, 1999.5). Furthermore, some activities are increasing while others decrease. Within printing, ‘Composition and plate-making’ declined nationally by 24% between 1991 and 1996, while ‘other activities related to printing’ went up by 26%.

Using a wider definition of printing, publishing and related industries, Shackleton (1998.14) shows total employment of 38,360 in the south west in 1996, with a slight projected decline to 38,000 by 2001. Thus about 1-in-60 of the region’s working population are employed in the industry. A more localised study in the Bristol area (Westec, 2000.3) confirms that employment in printing and packaging rose at faster than the national average between 1993 and 1998. The major change was in the size of enterprises. By 1998, 61% of all enterprises had only 1-4 employees, compared with 40% in 1991. Over the same period, the percentage of firms with between 5 and 49 employees had declined from one half to one third of the total. In terms of jobs, 75% are in firms classified as SMEs (under 200 employees) with the share of employment in larger firms going own from about 40% in 1991 to only 25% in 1998.

Skills, divisions of labour and union activities in the print industry

It follows from the necessarily brief account in the previous section that we are dealing with a ‘moving target’, an industry which is reconstituting itself, in which new technologies bring rapid shifts in the nature of actual jobs, skill needs, recruitment and retraining needs and power relationships.

Within this context the print workers’ trade union (GPMU) which has emerged from a series of amalgamations, following well publicised unions set-backs in the 1980s in the newspaper sector, has attempted to call on old principles of trade union solidarity to deal in new ways with changing working practices. In general terms, as will be seen in the next section, the GPMU has attempted to retain membership and an element of workplace control by strategies designed to ensure that its members acquire the new, computer-based skills required by the industry rather than allowing employers to ‘buy in’ such skills from outside. Such a development would not only dilute the influence of the union but also threaten the existing work culture with its established minimum standards. Computer skills are especially at a premium in the pre-press area of composition and plate-making, and the initial GPMU training effort in the case-study was concentrated here. Nationally, as noted above, employment in this area declined by 24% between 1991 and 1996 and this trend looks set to continue unless continuing favourable trading conditions allow pre-press numbers to be maintained in the context of increased output. This is
also partly balanced by the new skills required in publishing houses as they move into the pre-press area themselves. In addition, other customers will use their own word processing and DTP resources to prepare material for despatch to the printing works. While further research would be needed to clarify this point, anecdotic evidence from the case-study suggests employers, especially smaller ones, are prepared to accept retraining of existing staff rather than a programme of redundancies and re-hiring, since in general terms they are looking for multi-skilled, flexible workers with a good, general working knowledge of the industry as well as specific IT skills. Shackleton (1999.22) refers to a ‘blurring of skills’ as print firms acquire the capacity to provide an integrated design, print and distribution service.

At the same time, a further important division of labour within the industry is between the predominantly male pre-press and printing areas, and the predominantly female finishing and book-binding area. These latter work areas are characterised by lower rates of pay and jobs which are often part-time and temporary.

The work of the GPMU on skills and training in the context of the Trade Union Learning Fund (TULF)

The Labour government in the UK, elected in May 1997, demonstrated from an early date its recognition of the trade union role in promoting workplace (and to a lesser extent community) learning. The Trade Union Learning Fund (TULF) was established by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) in 1998. The fund aims to ‘promote innovative activity by trade unions to support the creation of a learning society’ (Cutter, 2000.1). Initial Round 1 bids were for 12 months, with Round 2 running for a further 12 months from 1999-2000 and Round 3 for two years from 2000-2002.

REgional Accord for CHange (REACH) was a second round Union Learning Fund (ULF) project led by the Wessex Branch of the GPMU, operating in the English counties of Hampshire and Dorset. The project has been widely reported, for example at regular meetings and seminars organised by the Union Learning Fund, and in the press (both local and trade), and an evaluative report produced (Payne, 2000). The project has been able to draw in further funding for training through the European Social Fund, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) via local colleges, and employers. It has led to a further successful bid by GPMU to the third round of ULF. The purpose of this new bid – Southwest Initiative for Graphical Training, or SIGhT - is to extend the project to the other union branches in the south west region, and it will operate over a two-year period.

The project has had both short-term practical training aims and longer-term strategic aims and outcomes:
Practical aims and outcomes: the GPMU has worked with a local training provider to organise digital courses for members (mainly working in the pre-press areas), usually over 3 weekends. This has covered the main computer software used in the industry. This has been very popular and successful with members, and indeed with employers. At workplace level, learning representatives have been selected and trained. They will be able to advise individual members about training opportunities, motivate and support them in their learning and sit on company training committees.

Strategic aims and outcomes: the GPMU has developed relationships with the employers’ organisation, the national training organisation, local providers, and a variety of agencies concerned with regional economic development, with the aim of working towards a sustainable structure of training into the future. Steve Attwill, GPMU Wessex Assistant Secretary, stated:

Our strategic aim is to bridge the divide between the 'old world' and the 'new world'. But we can only do this by 'following the job'. Members understand that in order to do this, it's not enough to have a skill, you must have a skill that's in demand. So, how can they get that opportunity? The union can then build on the fact that its members’ labour is in demand to establish bargaining power in defence of its members' interests. Those interests are traditional trade union concerns: job security, fair terms and conditions of employment and dignity at work.

Will employers ever learn?

One of the surprising features of the print industry, to an outsider, is the relative lack of interest taken by employers in training. Traditional apprenticeships have declined without new training forms being developed. There is low take-up of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), despite the fact that the employers’ organisation (BPIF) is a major provider of NVQ training. The National Training Organisation for these trades has yet to make an impact. The situation is exacerbated by the high proportion of SMEs, where there are problems in both funding and providing release for training (for a general view of training problems in SMEs, cf Johnson, 1999). The situation is summarised thus by Shackleton:

Despite the importance of technological change within the industry the level of training undertaken by the sector remains low with few companies using the training provided by BPIF in the region. The small size of the firms in the industry means that many often can not spare the personnel for training. (Shackleton, 1998,23)

This leads to a contradictory position in which the Training and Enterprise Council in Bristol, a government funded body whose task is to encourage workforce development, can report that printing and packaging firms are more likely than most sectors to report that
‘advances in technology and computerisation’ are ‘important business issues’, but less likely on average to consider ‘skills and the recruitment of good staff’ as important. (Westec, 2000.7) Vidler (1999. 6) notes the emergence of a ‘skills gap’ which occurs ‘as firms struggle to match investment in equipment with investment in digital training for the existing workforce’. This depressing picture of training within the industry is made worse by the failure of colleges to invest in new plant for training. This is partly due to decline in apprenticeships and partly to the enormous cost of the most modern printing equipment. The deal fixed up with the college in the case-study was only possible because it involved software training which can be carried out in IT suites designed with general purposes in mind. One of the recommendations of the ULF evaluation report was for joint action by the union, employers’ federation, colleges and national training organisation to explore ‘the development of a regional centre of excellence for training’ (Payne, 2000.13).

This picture of a uncoordinated and rather ineffectual training effort is supported by the Smallbone et al study previously mentioned. While concentrating their criticisms on the small and medium-sized firms, they note a lack of effective training policies, training budgets and management skills to manage new technology and training needs (Smallbone et al, 1999.39). In turn these criticism have been voiced more generally by a number of the research reports of the National Skills Task Force (e.g. Johnson, 1999). The final report of this Task Force makes interesting reading: while reporting the ‘very disturbing finding on the willingness of many adults to participate in learning’ (DfEE, 2000b.30) there is little comment on the unwillingness of employers to take training seriously. The previous report of this group had mentioned an increase in the Labour Force Survey monthly training participation rate from 10.5% in 1986 to 15.9% in 1999, while failing to highlight that all but 1.1% of this growth had taking place between 1986 and 1990! (DfEE, 2000a.20) What the final report did point up, however, was the significant percentage of managers in small firms (27%) who had no qualifications in management or anything else. Meanwhile, a separate government report concluded that ‘there does not appear to be a training culture for a large number of employees, and what training there is, is focused more on younger workers.’ (DfEE, 2000c.52)

Potentially, then, there is a common interest (but not identical interest: see next section) between trade unions and employers in attempting to crank upwards the quantity and quality of training taking place in the printing industry. Trade unions want to retain their members’ jobs and the union’s influence; managements want a supply of skilled labour to place alongside their investment in new technology. ‘Good’ employers who do train want to see an end to ‘bad’ firms who simply
pouch trained staff from elsewhere. A recent TUC South West report records the new partnership approach to training in the industry:

In contrast to earlier conflicts between employers and print unions, industrial relations continue to improve, and employers and the [GPMU] (are) increasingly working together to develop training capacity. They both realise the need to develop programmes to ensure that up-skilling keeps pace with the changes in production technology. (Vidler, 1999.6)

The trade union response: an end to confrontation?

Forrester and Payne (2000.153) have argued that studies of trade union ‘modernisation’ in the UK have emphasised ‘industrial relations issues such as the nature and direction of collective bargaining arrangements, organisational changes within trade unions themselves and union responses and strategies to changes in the labour market and to changes in the organisation of work.’ The renewed emphasis on education and training has gone largely unnoticed by academic commentators. At the same time, this new emphasis, as suggested above, does not mark a decisive break with traditional trade union concerns. Equipping members with the skills required by new workplaces is part-and-parcel of strategies to preserve members’ jobs, trade union membership and therefore power and influence in the workplace.

It is also clear that trade union demands for workplace education and training do not simply replicate employers’ demands for enhanced skills. They are likely to include issues of broader personal development as well as job specific training. For example, a number of employees in the case-study criticised the NVQ framework on the grounds that it accredited existing workplace skills but did not prepare workers for the coming digital revolution in the industry. There were also demands for more broad-based IT training, particularly for women in the traditionally ‘unskilled’ areas of bindery and finishing, and in the packaging sector (Payne, 2000. passim). As Cutter (2000.78) observes: ‘The key value added that trade unions bring is both the ability to encourage non traditional learners into learning and to ensure that programmes are driven by learner needs.’

Formal and informal learning in the print industry

One important assumption within the policy arena that is now being challenged in the academic literature is that training leads ‘automatically’ to improved performance and increased productivity and profitability. While it is impossible to go into this in any detail here, a few broad remarks are pertinent. Much of this material can be traced back to the emphasis placed on the ‘situated’ nature of learning within cultural practices.
This suggests a program for the developing practice of studying situated activity and learning. It might begin with a conception of learning as an aspect of culturally, historically situated activity. It would focus on the content of and the ways people participate in changing social practices singled out for study because they appear to lie at the heart of the production and reproduction – and transformation and change – of the sociocultural order. The present work furnishes strong beginnings for such a project.’ (Lave, 1996.30)

Stern and Sommerblad have argued that:

it is not so much the learning processes themselves that give rise to competence development and performance improvement as the way in which they are implemented. These findings direct attention to employee participation, new workplace practices such as incentive-based compensation, and social partnership involvement in joint decision-making. (Stern and Sommerblad, 1999.xiii, in Keep, 1999.10)

Keep, in his study of employer attitudes to training for the National Skills Task Force, concluded that ‘rather than see adult workplace learning as a discrete activity, it is better conceived of in the context of the personnel management and competitive strategy environment within which it takes place’. (Keep, 1999.10)

Print workers in the case-study demonstrated that:

- Managers often took little interest in the skills training courses they were attending
- Managers did not always make arrangements for them to practice and perfect new skills
- Some managers did make changes in work organisation to ensure practice and use of new skills
- The workers themselves were convinced of the value of both ‘tinkering’ (honing new skills) and attending courses in order to learn and apply new skills. (Payne, 2000)

It is not just that managers in the print industry tend to ignore the importance of training (Smallbone et al, 1999. 3 and 39), but that they have little awareness of how the organisation and culture of the workplace can inhibit the acquisition, development and application of new skills.
Conclusions: Local labour and global capital

The paper reaches a number of important conclusions about the global / local tension as it finds form in international debates about training and about lifelong learning:

1. Within globalisation, decisions of national governments about both economic and lifelong learning policy can and do influence the development of the new globalized economy;
2. Trade Unions are responding in new ways to the individualizing tendencies of late modern society and the global economy, while continuing to draw on the collective traditions of trade unionism. The provision of education and training for members is seen as a central role for trade unions by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and its affiliates;
3. In responding to globalisation, governments and civil society are making new and often radical demands on educational institutions;
4. Problems of management attitudes and education inhibit both the acquisition and application of skills in the workplace.
References


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