

Institutional framework for learning and development in an oil refinery, Nigeria: Evaluating workers sense-making

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the implications of learning programs in the context of work-process and work-reorganisation in an oil refinery, Nigeria. In the refinery, training is regarded as central to the attainment of the diverse managerial practices, designed to improve performance. Training is also seen as crucial for the involvement of workers and their co-operation in the production process. From the management's point of view, training is the cornerstone for the achievement of organisational objectives. This paper is, however, concerned with the evaluation of such Management's claims on the relevance, and importance attached to learning and development as strategic tools for the attainment of organisational goals. Drawing on extensive in-situ observation and ethnographic study of the refinery, the paper evaluates the normative assumptions on training and development. The paper assesses employees' attitudes and experiences towards learning programs in the organisation. The study, from which this paper is drawn, is essentially theory-led analysis and context-based evaluations. It also draws largely from Labour Process conceptual remit.

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1. INTRODUCTION

While decisions on training and learning programs in the oil industry generally, are often viewed in terms of need for the industry to positively respond to the challenges of the operating environment, the dimensions of the implications of such imperatives on employees' attitudes and orientation also need to be evaluated and understood. To be evaluated against the backdrop of institutional framework and discourse surrounding training programme in the NNPC (referred to as Corporation in this Paper), is how the processes and procedures underpinning training decisions are formulated. Even though training provision and the assumptions behind it are governed by the challenges of production process and imperatives for efficiency, within the wider context of the operating environment and labour process, workers' own-assessment, further illustrates their perceptions and experiences of these decisions. The paper is organised along these lines; Section 1 provides analysis of the conceptual and normative assumptions which underpinned learning programs in the Corporation; Section 2 describes the background of the research setting; Sections 3 which is significant to the body of the paper, provides the contextual and empirical evaluations of workers own sense-making and experience of learning and development in the refinery. The Conclusion, drawn from these Sections, forms section 4

1.1 Background/ Research Context

The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), where this research was carried out was established in April 1977 by the Federal Government of Nigeria with the mandate to manage the operational aspects of the oil industry in Nigeria. NNPC is a successor organization to the Nigerian Oil Company (NNOC) which was established in 1971. In addition to its exploration activities, NNPC developed operational interest in refinery, petrochemicals and product transportation as well as marketing. Between 1978 and 1989, NNPC constructed petroleum and petrochemical refineries in Warri, Kaduna and Port-Harcourt. However, in the last three decades, NNPC, as one of the largest federally owned corporations in Nigeria, has emerged from one of the far-reaching organizational restructuring in its over thirty-five year history. In 1978, the corporation was decentralised into twelve strategic business units (SBUs) and subsidiaries, covering the entire spectrum of the corporation's operation. As an autonomous federally owned Corporation, NNPC is regulated by the Department of Petroleum Resources—a Department within the Ministry of Petroleum Resources. Over the years, the operations and activities of NNPC have centered on coping with challenges of both internal and external developments in the oil industry, in particular with regards to its products and technology of production. The concern has been how to make its products compete favourably in the world market, both in terms pricing and quality. As a result, the business units and subsidiaries of the State-Owned Oil firm have been reorganized “unbundled” into Companies with NNPC as a holding-Company. Port-Harcourt Refinery Company (PHRC), Eleme, Port-Harcourt, Nigeria, which provides the empirical context for this research work, is one of the twelve subsidiaries of NNPC. It provides petroleum refinery service to the nation. It is also charged with the responsibilities of development and production of specialized

petroleum products. The operations and activities of the company are carried out by two Departments within the company: Production, Engineering, and Total Quality Control Dept; and Administrative, Personnel and Manpower Development Dept.

The context in which training is provided in NNPC forms the analytical backdrop for the evaluation of the dimensions, and workers' attitudes surrounding training programmes. Indeed, the implementation of new work practices such as team-working and quality programmes conceivably provide the micro-social context for skill formations programmes at NNPC. Nevertheless, these are not without workplace labour relations issues and problems. Here, it is noted that the institutional framework that emphasises the “consensual character” of skill formation in the corporation no doubt tends to over-stress the commitment and willingness of the workforce to training programs (Stuart, M., 1996:253). Empirical evaluations from the refinery put to test the institutional assumptions on which training programmes are underpinned. On one dimension of the analysis, are the management normative assumptions surrounding training programs in the corporation, and on the other, are the evaluations of attitudes and orientations of the workers towards training. The importance attached to training for employees within NNPC has taken a normative assumption of “a direct impact on learning, behavioural and attitudinal changes required for new work processes, and therefore an individual performance improvement” (Stuart, M., 2003:27). It is also in this understanding that an overall corporate improvement and effective workplace performance of the workers are assumed. However, these normative assumptions and the institutional framework put in place to elicit this greater training benefits are not without implications on workers' lived work experiences. At another dimension of this evaluation is the analysis of the relations between training decisions and provisions, and the implications on workplace labour relations. Specifically, it is concerned with the evaluation of Branch unions' perceptions; their priorities and evaluation of training programmes in the corporation. Here, particular attention is paid to analysing trade unions' effort at emphasising training issues within the context of institutional framework of labour relations, and other workplace training committees in the corporation. The reactions and responses of trade unions to training programmes and the procedures for determining training needs are analysed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Management's Normative Assumptions of Learning Programs in NNPC and Trade Unions Perceptions: A theoretical evaluation

In recent years, and with a renewed managerial concern on “social re-engineering” in the context of managements' search for “best practices” towards enhancing productivity, some strands of theoretical assumptions have emerged with which to evaluate unions' own representational roles and activities in the context of the corporation's skill formation strategies. Learning programs have been conceived as part of the managerial designed strategies, through which the desired improved performance and quality assurance could be guaranteed. Within this normative assumption, there are

also concerns for “constant assessment of the likely impact, and what unions’ roles should be over training provisions” (Claydon, J., al 1994 cited in Stuart 1996:253). To Stuart (1996), the concern to adequately evaluate trade unions’ side of the coin stems from underpinning assumptions of the consensual nature of skill formation, from which the discourse is presented by the management as “panacea” for filling the “skill-deficit” gap, occasioned by the new managerial imperatives. It is also seen by the Management as an important element in the development of “more co-operative” work relations.

Also, as noted by Leisink (1993 cited in Stuart 1996:253), in an environment of organisational transformation, “skill formation and occupational interests are promoted as central issues, and therefore seen as essential, if unions are to continue in their pragmatic relations with management in response to organisational changes in the workplace.” Unions are, therefore, to see training as a “positive-sum” in an era of “productivist ethos” where all parties are to be involved in the productivity improvement drive of the organisation. Increasingly, trade unions in the NNPC are being called upon to identify with Management in seeing training as central factor for skill formation needed for productivity improvement of their members. Consequently, attention is being shifted towards incorporating training and issues surrounding it as part of “bargaining agenda” in the context of the Joint Consultative Council’s (JCC) meetings. Incorporated in JCC agenda, both at the Corporate and Branch levels are discussions on training programmes for the workforce. At JCC meetings, it is often stressed that the “the main qualities of the training programmes are to be of positive outcomes, and intended to be of mutual benefit to all” (General Manager, NNPC Group Learning Dept). However, as argued by Heyes (1993:297), our understanding of “conceptual assumptions and institutional framework that provide justification and support for training programmes must be sensitive to the “conflicts and tensions”, bounded in the discourse in the organisation. This is because workplace institutional arrangements such as those for training and development, and the assumptions of the management within the program have a tendency to shape the direction of choices and decisions for the training and types of training to be provided (Heyes 1993). Representational roles of trade Unions’ leaders are also shaped by the “past experiences and expectations regarding the training programme” (Heyes 1993:298). Such directions of the choices and decisions are “particularly shaped by the ‘employers’ attempt to introduce measures aimed at promoting workplace flexibility” (Heyes 1993:298).

Flexibility in an era of managerial practices at NNPC for instance, includes multi-skilling, team-working and commitment to total quality of the corporation, which, within the logic of trade unions traditional orientation and roles, may equally generate tensions and hostile receptions within the leadership of the trade unions. A “fragmented attitude” from Union leaders may emerge where there exists a perception of “occupational interests” and “occupational boundaries” within the workforce, and, therefore, sees such management’s intention on training and skill formation as “additional responsibility on the employees without an appropriate framework for up-grading or reward after the training” (Heyes 1993:298). On the other hand, some other segments within the unions may see skill formation and training programme as constituting a threat to skill demarcation within the organisation (Heyes 1993). In other words, occupational interests, skill demarcations and boundaries may constitute fundamental variables for consideration by union leaders and, therefore, attempt to insert its significance in the wider content of the “social partnership” agenda of the training programs.

Unions responses to skill formation and training programme have been analysed along two basic strategies; Unions may adopt a “price oriented strategy” whereby they are ready to trade off the wage claims for the potential positive outcome of training, and alternatively as “skill oriented” path, “where unions go along with the management in adopting measures based on functional flexibility” (Mahnkopf 1992 cited in Heyes 1993:298). In adopting either of these strategic choices within organisational transformation arrangement, unions tacitly endorse the introduction of skill up-grading programme that accompanies new work practices (Mahnkopf 1992). In Heyes’ (1993:298) account, central to this partnership and evolving bargaining style has been a pre-occupation with “re-integration of the processes of conception and execution in the organisation of work and a stabilization of wage levels linked to on-going training.” Consequently, unions could indirectly be placed under pressures to rather accept a “competitive strategy of acquiescence than a proactive independent involvement” (Heyes 1993:298). Thus, a contextual approach to understanding the unions’ representational roles and attitudes to issues of training decisions and programmes are determined and influenced by wider contextual variables such as “stabilization of wages”, and “career-growth” assurance; putting to test the strengths of unions within a particular managerial regime of training programme. These variables as identified by Heyes (1993:298) carry certain implications for training outcomes, from the workers’ perspective. Other contextual factors such as the existence of “multi-union work environment, unions density, and skill compositions of the

workforce, unions training bargaining skills, and the institutional framework of recognition in the organisation” (Heyes 1993:298), shape the position of trade unions within the institutional arrangement of skill formation for members.

In the emerging circumstances of work process in the workplaces, it is advocated that trade unions and management should take a more “productivist approach” to workplace relations, and, therefore, be more open to the challenges of competitiveness of the organisation. Among other engagements, unions are advised to enter into more “alliances with the management at the level of qualification politics” (Mahnkopf 1991:61). In this way it is envisaged that Unions will be able to “incorporate” more issues into collective bargaining agenda, and more mutually beneficial training decisions and programmes for their members. In the emerging dictates, unions’ concern is expected to be on potentially beneficial training decisions for their members in the context of contemporary changes in the work processes of production. For the unions, the emerging challenge is the concern on how to re-invent the organisational and collective bargaining processes in a manner that will re-structure the social composition of skill profiles of their members (Mahnkopf 1991). Increasingly, within the new arrangements, and in response to the challenges in work and production processes, unions have come to realise that “skill up-grading strategies through training programmes promote the interests of members rather than mere adjustments through productivity and bargaining concessions” (Mahnkopf 1991:62). It is in this context of “realistic engagement” on issues of training that unions’ workplace activities must include how to “enhance skill formations and occupational interest of members” (Mahnkopf 1991:63). In addition to “working in alliance” with management at the level of production strategies” (Mahnkopf 1991:63), increasing challenges of skill acquisition and “qualification politics” within the workplace have now compelled them to re-channel their orientations towards organisational training programmes.

Therefore, in adjusting to the challenges of technology of production that increasingly redefine managerial practices, union leaders are compelled to respond with “active modernization policy” (Mahnkopf 1991:63); a re-integration of attitudes towards training programmes. Such integrative attitude, according to Mahnkopf would, therefore, involve “skill-orientated” strategy which among others implies unions accepting the “supply-oriented labour market policy” (Mahnkopf 1991:63). In other words, while unions’ roles involve traditional “watchful-eyes” on the gains won in the past, regarding employment relations issues, their roles “need to incorporate how to deal with functional flexibility and how to adapt within the internal labour market”(Mahnkopf 1991:63) occasioned by the challenges of production requirements. The greater pressure on the unions to maintain job security for members is conjoined with the concern to ensure functional flexibility of members’ skill through the adoption of “skill-oriented” strategy, in “making rational decisions to agree with the retraining of workers”(Mahnkopf 1991:66) within the managerial framework of training programmes.

In NNPC, the adoption and chances of success of such “skill-oriented” strategy in the “modernisation” of Labour-Management relations would appear to be mutually reasonable and acceptable to both partners in the context of emerging drive for quality product and improved performance. The complex competitive operative environment in which NNPC has to operate, coupled with complex dimensions of technology of production; the survival of the corporation would appear to depend on how to maintain high-level skills of the workforce, and in addition to take measures to improve the skill formation of the workforce. The concern for skill enhancement, encapsulated in the management’s framework on training programmes apparently supported by the Unions, has a long tradition of existence and operation in the Corporation. This has long been linked with joint union-management orientation towards “stabilising” the internal labour market, and from the trade unions’ perspective, aims at maintaining and enhancing workers’ skill requirement for the over-all improved performance of the corporation.

2.2 Transformational Trainer and Learning Transfer: utility of “Self-Concept” Model

In utilizing much of the self-concept model in analysing the relationship between transformational trainer and learning transfer Creon and Schermuly (2021) argue that transformational trainer often succeed in inspiring training to transfer knowledge to workplace job performance. The interlink between training transfer and roles of the trainees offer instructive perspective to understand the changing dynamics of “self-concept” in the regulations of workplace job performance as outcome of training, within the contours of changes in work-environment of organizations, (Terrace and Lundgreen, 2020; cited in Creon and Schermuly 2021). Thus in the context of evolving and changes in work-environment in NNPC, management is expected to take on the responsibilities of offering formal training, for the training transfer to have meaningful impact on the trainees’ performance. As noted by Creon and Schermuly (2021:2), self-concept is understood as employees’ self-construct regarding their values,, attitudes and actions in the

workplace. In demonstrating much of the attributes of self-concept, workers modify their workplace behaviour, and training-transfers attitudes in line with the challenges facing the organization. Formal and informal training, thus provide the 'platform' for the moderation of self-concept, in context. According to Shamir et al., 1993; cited in Creon and Schermuly, 2021: 3), positive changes in workers' self-concept lead to improvement in their motivation and this in turn, increase workers' performance. Thus, at NNPC, the important and relevant measures of performance of participants in training programs are their abilities to demonstrate these learning to workplace performance; as training transfer.

Aragon, Jimenez and Valle 2013 had earlier come up with postulation/model that link organizational learning (OL) with workers learning and organizational performance. Citing Crossan and Kane (1999) they maintain that OL remains a principal means of achieving strategic renewal in organization. While referring to OL as multi-dimensional concept, Slater and Narrer 1994 had earlier observed that the concept is a complex, multi-dimensional construct occurring at multi-levels of organization and sub-process for improved performance, through workers learning transfer. Conceptualized thus, as analytical model, Tsang, 1999; cited in Aragon 2013 provides two approaches to understanding OL; one, as a process by which organization learns and develops 'new knowledge'. In this understanding, distinctive sub-process of OL are identified as "knowledge acquisition, distribution, interpretation and memory"; all conceived as core dimensions of OL concept (Aragon, J., and Valle., 2013: 2). Another sub-process of the approach conceives OL as an organisation, skilled in creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights (ibid: 3). Repertoire of OL thus facilitate improved organizational performance, with 'new insights' and 'knowledge'. In facilitating over-all knowledge transfer for organizational capabilities, OL also facilitates the process of change in individuals; in shared thoughts and action; as also shaped by institutional culture of the organization (Crossan, M., and Kane., 1999; cited in Aragon et al., 2023). Indeed, in the operationalization of the concept of OL, it has also been empirically demonstrated at the levels of individual, group, and the organization; indicating for example, how individual employees generate new knowledge and insights. The knowledge and insights so developed from formal and informal training build the competencies and motivation for enhanced performance (Bontis, N., and Crossan, M., 2002; cited in Aragon et al. 2013: 4). As employees integrate their individual knowledge within the group for enhanced performance, it becomes a shared understanding and capacity for organisational performance (Huber, 1991; Crossan M., 1998, in Aragon et al., 2013: 4). Dialogue and joint-action programs are outcome; demonstrating effective performance of the group. The institutionalization of both individual knowledge and groups' learning, which also embed other symbolic elements of the organisation such as structure, system, procedures and culture (Bontis, N., and Crossan, M., 2002) are also core elements that enhance organisational performance.

As operationalization of this concept resonates among these three levels of sub-processes, in NNPC, they provide basis for sustainable competitive advantage for the corporation and therefore remain key variables in enhancing the performance of NNPC. Generally, organizations that are thus able to 'learn' will also be able to "sense events" and dynamics within the competitive operating environment; providing leverage for the success of the organisation. Broadly, empirical evidence has supported organisational learning capability and its performance (Rhodes, J. Lok, P. and Hung, R., 2008; Camps and Luna-Aroka, 2012). For example, a positive impact on productivity (Aragon et al., 2013), employees' salaries and equality (Cantarello, S., and Fillipini, R., 2012). However, in many of the empirical evidence, OL continue to maintain a "mediating role" in the relationship between learning transfer and organisational performance. Indeed OL puts organisation on the path of success if they are able to "learn" and make "meaning" out of the competitive operating environments, for improved performance.

3. EMPIRICAL REVIEW

3.1 Integrating the Unions into Institutional Framework for Learning: roles of NNPC's Group Learning Department

As opposed to some other issues between the trade unions and management in NNPC, skill and learning development have remained issues of mutual interest, and with considerable measure of "success" and "satisfaction" to both parties. Trade Unions in the partnership relations have not relented in exploring the opportunity offered by the arrangement to advance the interest of members on issues of skill acquisition. Apparently therefore, issues of skill and learning development have been removed away from contestation in the Corporation. In NNPC, "work processes" have implied changes in production technology and, therefore, a certain level of "acquired" skills needed to be added to current skill formation for effective performance. The opportunity offered to trade unions for inputs in the institutional process of skill acquisition through the joint partnership also

implies "opportunities for trade unions to exert influence on the structuring of the context of work, on working systems, and on the management's planning with respect to personnel and training matters" (Mahnkopf 1991:71). In NNPC, in the unions' attempt to elicit the loyalty of members, particularly the skilled workers, they encouraged their members to continue to explore the workplace institutional framework in advancing the occupational interests of this cohort. To the unions, all institutional processes needed to be explored for the purpose of "social and normative integration" (Mahnkopf 1991:71).

In NNPC and in line with the "pacts" concerning training and development, agreements exist, which see voluntary skill development for all categories of the workforce as part of the strategic drive for improved performances in moments of transformation in the Corporation. It helps the unions and their members in making claims for higher position and seniority. Thus, the strategy for workforce utilisation, as noted by the (GM, Group Learning Department) "has been towards merging of expansion in training opportunity with the skills-need of the corporation." Indeed, against the backdrop of complex, social-technical skill requirement of continuous process production of the oil industry, the concept of continuous training has enabled NNPC to reconcile the occupational interests of all categories of the workforce with task and functional flexibility in skills formation of the workforce. In line with the institutional framework for learning in NNPC, a move towards functional flexibility and building skill profile was being undertaken as part of management's drive towards improved performance and efficiency. As extracted from the Organisation's document on training, functional flexibility is conceived as employees' ability to undertake tasks both horizontally and vertically. Within this arrangement, acting as catalyst and platform for skill development and learning had been the institutional framework through which learning-needs were identified, and competencies-development programmes targeted, at each occupational group's needs. The framework combines an emphasis on core skills with "modularisation approach" to facilitate multi-skilling. The strong focus of the learning-development programme as remarked by the GM, (Group Learning and Development), "is an emphasis not only on core skills development but also on mobility of the workers within the internal labour market as outcome of the learning programmes." According to him, "skill and learning development in the corporation is about developing for the corporation, the expertise on processes, techniques and operations both at the Corporate and Subsidiary levels (GM, Group Learning Department). In other words, the objective was to enhance capacity building of the targeted occupational groups.

The goals of the Group Learning Department in connection with the above were tied with the objectives of being "committed to accelerating professional excellence." As remarked by the Group Manager, "our organisation and staff should have a good knowledge of entire world of oil industry; in other words, a knowledge-management visionary for NNPC" (GM, Group Learning Department). He noted further that workers in NNPC "are ready through learning to identify, acquire, share and use knowledge to achieve our goals through standardized processes and by creating enabling environment which rewards knowledge sharing" (GM, Group Learning Department). In this regard, and as contained in the framework for learning and development, "NNPC will be a continuous learning organisation that will acquire, share and transfer knowledge of its operations and business strategies to enhance performance." According to the GM, this would be achieved by "surveying skill needs of groups of employees, and rolling out programs that target the competencies and knowledge in which each group needs the most performance improvement intervention". Through "Competence Development Programmes" (CDP) at NNPC, the Corporation identified areas where it needed to improve the capabilities of its workforce. According to the GM (Group Learning Department), "the first step is to pinpoint these learning needs, and we do this by survey and evaluation of current skill levels horizontally and vertically, and estimate skill level needs for identified groups for them to be successful". This process of identifying and evaluating skills needs "has become an inclusive and integrative approach in enhancing employee's awareness of their learning needs, and this "helps break down any resistance to learning new skills" (GM Learning Department). In NNPC, institutional framework for implementing learning and skill development were categorised as "Chief Officers Development Program (COMDP), this is an eight-week mandatory programme for Chief Officers transiting to Managers Cadre" (Group Learning Department).

In 1991, the Management saw an urgent need to develop a programme that would groom Senior Officers, transiting to the Management Cadre - the programme was referred to as Chief Officers' Management Development Programme (COMDP). This platform for learning and development has remained a major and regular tradition in NNPC as a "key factor for capacity building for emerging managers to live up to the Corporation's vision, mission statement, and expectations of the Corporation for improved performance" (GM, Group Learning Department). As remarked by the GM, "the objective of the COMPD is to train Leader/Managers for the future -

those that will eventually manage NNPC.” According to him, “the programme is like a talent management programme, to tap into the potentiality of would-be managers that NNPC has.” With the initiatives and programme like these, NNPC has been able to “harness those talents and develop the staff into world class Leaders/managers” (GM, Group Learning Department). Through this transition in skill development programme, NNPC as noted by the GM had been able to have “the best crop of managers and the best talent that you can find in the industry and that is why we insist that our greatest asset is the human capital – the staff of NNPC”. In the context of its operational challenges, and as attempts to make it more responsive to these operational challenges, the GM noted “we are working towards a situation that the managers that are being trained will work in any of the subsidiaries, and therefore be able to move the organisation forward as a commercialized company that it is supposed to be.”

In addition to the COMDP, NNPC has also “unfolded a new leadership development model” (GM, Group Learning Department). In the new leadership development model referred to as “7DL”, designed for leaders in NNPC to exhibit “the seven dimensions of leadership; to champion enterprise view, to demonstrate interpersonal effectiveness, envision future and acts, coach and develop others, demonstrate leadership qualities, and demonstrate professional excellence in maximizing alignment” (NNPC Training Document). In the estimation, and normative assumption behind this arrangement “these qualities are expected to eliminate divergent views on leadership by providing a common ground for all leaders in NNPC, and for the development of high performing individuals responsible for professional functions and projects” (NNPC Training Document). According to the GM, (Group Learning Department) “through the new initiatives of leadership development in NNPC, we are developing leaders who can work effectively in 3 domains; “NNPC vision, and its communication, people behavioural and interpersonal skills, and business task skill,”

The COMDP was designed as the “vehicle to sharpen the leadership, managerial and communication skills of Chief Officers (Senior) transiting to Managerial Cadre. In the current efforts at reviewing the programmes, and in harmony with the new leadership challenges in NNPC, the ‘7DL’ model has been incorporated.” According to the GM (Group Learning Department), the ‘7DL’ became the basis for revision of the existing (COMDP), and through which trained leaders would have “multiple ways to work in cross functional assignments.” Incorporated in the 7DL were: “new and future leaders, mid-level leaders and experienced leaders programs; each focusing on leaders’ behaviour, direction-setting strategic in decision making.”

Other skill and learning development programmes under the Training Programs of NNPC were: Senior Officers Transition programme (SOTP), this was designed for staff on supervisory grade level, and the objective was to “acquaint the group to the core business challenges of the Corporation, and also to provide them with basic computer and supervisory skills required by the supervisors” (Group Learning Department, NNPC). Another program was the Foundation Leadership Development Program (FLDP). This program helps “new-joiners” i.e fresh graduates, to make a quick and seamless transition into working career in the corporation. It was aimed at “developing interpersonal and team building skills, and in fostering and sustaining value adding relationships, to stimulate creativity and entrepreneurial skills among the “new entrants” (Group Learning Department, NNPC). Other learning programmes were induction programmes for “experienced-hires”, to create awareness and understanding of the NNPC core values, ethics and business processes, and to acquaint the experienced hires with the refinery plant operations. Also, fresh graduates recruited into the corporation were inducted for a period of one month, and this was to make them develop personal effectiveness in the workplace (Group Learning Department, NNPC). Under the Foundation Skills Training Programme, young graduate engineers and technicians were equipped with skills and capabilities required to operate in the oil and gas industry. According to the GM (Group Learning Department), “the objective is to provide the young technicians and graduates with a common platform upon which they can build a career in the oil and gas industry.” Through the programme, the basic skills and operational understanding needed for the first four years of their career in the oil industry were provided.

As part of institutional arrangement to enhance the performance of the workforce and quality products, Corporate Total Quality Department was also established in 1998 as “Strategic Commercialisation, Reorganisation and Capitalization Unit. The Total Quality Department had the “objective of improving NNPC work processes to achieve the vision” of the total quality across the Departments. The operational objectives of the Department were linked with plant- processes operation and quality requirements at the refinery level. As remarked by the GM, Corporate Total Quality Department (CTQD), “Total Quality Management remained one of the most laudable initiatives of NNPC that has culminated in the establishment of TQM Departments at the SBUS and CSUS.” For instance, as he noted the “CTQD designed the modules, and initially handled the programme for the Chief

Officers courses before this was later handed over to the Human Resources Division.”

In the context of challenges of continuous process technology of oil production and distribution, CTQD developed and carried out series of “service level agreements” and programmes with the several departments and units of the Corporation. In pursuance of its objectives, CTQD mission was to develop an in-house consultancy, collaborating and co-ordination of initiatives for performance improvements in the Corporation (Corporate Total Quality Department, NNPC). Accordingly, CTQD was more pro-active in engaging the SBUS to improve their business processes, to align and re-position the corporation for high performance as well as creating appropriate process and systems for improved performance (GM, CTQD). As noted by the GM (CTQD), for “NNPC to achieve its process of transformation, there remained a need to develop and implement standard operating mechanisms for all units and sections of the corporation.” Towards this end the CTQD co-ordinated the service-level agreements with all Units of the Corporation in “order to improve their delivery capabilities” (GM, CTQD). The “Service-Level Agreements” provided the platforms for all stakeholders in quality improvement to participate and share ideas and procedures for enhancing improved performance (CTQD, NNPC 2008).

3.2 Learning and Training in NNPC: reconceptualization of Trade Unions’, and Members’ Concern

A “managerialist” understanding of the importance of existing institutional framework and arrangement concerning learning and training in NNPC, as described above, continues to take a significant impression of “linear relationship” between processes of skill formation and performance of the corporation. In the normative understanding of the Corporation, there is a linear relationship between training and effective performance. The assumption in mainstream management literature has also been that there is “causal positive contribution between training and individual employees’ adaptability to his organisation” (Elena P, 2001:327). It is also normatively perceived, linearly, of the significance of knowledge acquired for organisational improved performance. This Section of the Paper makes an evaluation and reconceptualization of this assumption by providing analytical insights into workers’ own perception of training in the Corporation. By evaluating workers’ own assumptions and experiences of learning and training in NNPC, the Section examines the “flip-side” and the basic differences between learning provided and impact on the workers, using the refinery workers ‘shop floor workers’ of the Corporation as the unit of analysis. Arguably, training and learning may appear to be on the way of fulfilling the normative expectation of the Corporation’s drive for improved performance. However, and in essence, it may fall short of fulfilling the intrinsic expectations of the workers themselves. This is because as observed by Elena (2001), the simplified assumptions about the positive outcome of training and learning have come to represent kinds of “obvious” benefits both for the individuals and the organisation. Thus, as raised by Mathieu, K., (1992), Noe (1986) cited in Elena 2001:327), there are “multiplicity of factors influencing training effectiveness” and outcomes. There is also the “difficulty of transferring learning from training events back to the process of work itself,” Baldwin and Ford, 1988; Casey 1980; (cited in Elena 2001:327). In other words, there are always the “contradictory purposes”, located in the different perceptions of both the management, and the workers themselves.

Indeed, while the relationship between training expectations (outcome) and organisational improved performance remains a potent one, there are a whole lot of “social, cultural and political dimensions” (Elena 2001:328), that tend to mediate these “uni-linear assumptions”. Therefore, in a more critical account of this relationship, Elena (1999a) provides a contextual analysis from the perspective of individual learners; individuals’ concerns and expectations. According to Elena, “if we are to appreciate more fully the complexity of social processes of organisational life, we need to move beyond the linear representation, to capture the complex web of reciprocal, non-linear interactions between the individual and the organisation” (Elena 2001:328). Utilized in this way, this theoretical construct, therefore, provides a critical evaluation of what training implied, from the workers’ perspective within the refinery. It seeks to evaluate the perceived impact of learning activities from the workers’ own perspective. As noted above, there are certain socio-cultural and infra-politics and processes within the Corporation which shape and mediate the normative assumptions between training and its outcome. While it is indeed acknowledged that learning, as described by Elena (2001:328) implies the “liberation of knowledge through self-reflection and questioning,” (the developmental aspect of it is seen as “double-loop process”), echoing Argyris’ (1978), earlier formulation that training should be conceptualised as both structural, “off-the-job” careers, and instrumental “on-the-job”, day-to-day “problem-solving initiatives that seek to instil a greater awareness and understanding of work practices while providing the scope for development and growth” (Elena 2001:329). However, in reality, and against the backdrop of other multiple factors mediating workplace labour relations and workers’ orientation, the assumptions behind these

definitions are not “determinate” *a priori*, particularly “when organisational and individual priorities compete” (Elena 2001:329).

This theoretical evaluation is undertaken against the existing competing goals in terms of improved performance, drive for quality product and sustenance of the Corporation which NNPC seeks to achieve, and the embedded implications, being experienced by workers themselves when seeing learning and training as opportunities for the fulfilment of diverse expectations. Within the context of the organisation’s work process, even though the workers expect a positive outcome from the training and learning programmes, the realities of it not meeting their individual expectations” on-the-job” and “off-the-job” remain. Both implicit and explicit in the importance attached to training by the individuals is the “assumption of fulfilment of both personal and career goals on the job” (Cagne 1983 cited in Elena 2001:330). And this in turn influences the “level of motivation” that drives individuals’, willingness to learn. Authors have argued that individual workers’ responses to training have always been a function of the relationship between “training motivation and learning” (Elena 2001:330). To Noe (1986; cited in Elena 2001:330), “trainees will be more motivated to participate more in training services” if there is a ‘symmetry’ between such training and high performance. Mediating factors between such motivation and high performance are found to be “personal factors and individual career planning” (Elena 2001:331). In other words, a balance between individuals’ identification with their job, facilitated by workplace positive influences, enhances high performance at the job. By way of extending Elena’s (2001) arguments the micro-political processes in the workplace that are perceived to be favourable to individual learners stimulate a willingness to approach training with “positive intention” to learn. Therefore, the contextual factors and conditions of the workplace influence and underpin workers’ attitudes and responses to training. These conditions, as noted by Elena (2001:332) provide the “in-depth analysis of interactive between the individual and the organisation “which then shape individuals’ attitudes to training. This is because, “individuals construct their realities of the significance and association between such rhetoric and practice of training in the organisation” (Elena 2001: 332).

To Holton and Baldwin (2003), transfer of learning to workplace performance remains a critical issue in analysing the relationship between the learner and the organisation” (cited in Dan S. Chiaburu 2005:605). For the organisation to enhance its performance, such skills and behaviour learned and practice during training must be “transferred to the workplace, maintained over time, and generalised over contexts” (Dan S. Chiaburu 2005: 604). Indeed, for training effectiveness to take place in the Organisation there must be an integrative balance between the contextual components of the organisation and individual expectations. To Mathieu and Martineau (1997 cited in Chiaburu 2005:605), the contextual components incorporate an existence of “continuous learning culture and supervisor support that influence not only individual’s attitude in terms of goals and expectations”, but also the various training outcomes, for example, “learning, training transfer, maintenance and generalisations” (Tracey et al 2001 in Chiaburu 2005:605). As maintained by Colquitt et al (2000) situational characteristics shaped by organisational culture and micro-social process of the context “have the most positive relationship with training motivation and outcomes”(cited in Chiaburu 2005:605). My evaluation in this Section of the Paper responds to these theoretical assumptions and constructs, as put forward by the various authors. Discussion of my observation in the refinery has centred on; the relationship between contextual factors in the workplace; continuous-learning culture, supervisor supports, training motivation and training outcomes – learning, transfer of learning to workplace practices. For the purpose of this evaluation, the analysis draws on Baldwin and Ford’s (1988) definition of “transfer of learning” as the “degree to which trainees effectively apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes gained in a training context to the job”(cited in Chiaburu 2005:606). When the learner is subsequently able to “reproduce the skills in a new setting, it is referred to as “training maintenance”, and when such skill is applied to more complex task situations’ – training generalisations” (Ford, S., 1998 cited in Chiaburu 2005:606). Thus, in determining training outcomes, and what learning holds for individual learners are “a number of contextual/work environment factors, conceptualised in terms of organisational normative values, belief and expectations that knowledge acquisition and utilization are crucial for the organisation’s competitive advantage” (London and Mone, 1999 cited in Chiaburu 2005:607). In other words, when there is congruence between workers’ perception of these normative values, motivation for learning is high and willingness to transfer such learning to workplace activities is demonstrated.

In exploring skill developments and its deployment trajectory especially as part of attempts to empirically evaluate the theoretical construct of workplace contexts and relationship with workers perception of learning and outcome in NNPC, qualitative method has been adopted. For an in-depth understanding of the nature of the relationship between training and outcomes, direct observations and unstructured interviews methods were

adopted. These were adopted in order to understand the specific type of skill development relevant for the oil industry in meeting the challenges of the competitive environment. In the evaluation, emphasis was placed on individuals’ perceptions of the current training provisions in the corporation. In relation to individual experience of learning programmes, the approach allowed an in-depth analysis of individuals’ perception, and attitudes to learning, their evaluation of contextual factors that facilitated or restricted learning. The “critical incident” technique was particularly useful in allowing the particular learners to “talk about their particular journey across this map; the skills acquired, how, when and why they acquired them” (Elena 2001:332).

In the attempt to enhance the depth and breadth of the research sample and in exploring deeply, the interaction between the individual and the organisation, data were collected pertaining to the organisation’s training programme through my discussion with the GM (Group Learning Department), and from the organisation records and material pertaining to training. NNPC provides a good example of oil industry which has undergone a process of restructuring, and that of its work processes in response to the challenges of its operating environment and the product market, and which consequently required appropriate responsiveness to these expectations. This has entailed a great need for training and learning for the workforce. A significant challenge to the Corporation in the context of these imperatives of production process remained central to the issues of training and skill development. Behind the introduction of various multi-level skill development programmes at NNPC had been the normative assumption that, by transferring learning and self-development to the individuals, they would be better placed to positively respond to challenges facing the oil industry (GLD, Training Policies and Practices).

3.3 Workplace Learning and Development in NNPC: a contextual evaluation

A considerable body of research work has been provided on contextual factors which influenced managements to embark upon training programme for their workforce. For instance, Hayton, D., (1996) had argued that certain circumstances induced firms to provide training. According to him, these included; firms’ acquisition of new process-technology, competitiveness within the industry itself and the level of workforce skill formation. In a more refined approach, Billett (2001) puts workplace learning environment as significant in determining employees’ and employers’ learning relations. According to Billett (2001) workers need to be given the opportunity to learn (which normatively, NNPC gives), and much depends on the workers’ willingness to learn and put it into effective practices. Positive contextual factors are referred to as ‘affordances,’ while workers’ willingness to take up the opportunities is described as “engagement” (Billett 2001). In other words, when a workplace has developed a motivating learning culture, there tends to be symmetry between the two relationships. And where there is such a balance, the aspirations to learn and put learning into effective use seem unproblematic to both management and the workers. Central to this empirical evaluation, therefore, was to examine the interplay between the two relationships; of what drove the decisions both for the management and the workers. A significant characteristic and dimension to learning in the oil industry as noted by Sternberg et al (2000) is the experiential nature of the learning process and its transfer. In the workplace of the oil industry, the complex socio-technical dimensions of process of production make the learning and utilization of skills an “experiential” one. Elaborating on the experiential dimensions of learning, Dewey, in Schon (1987) notes that the learner has to see for himself, and that, appropriate guidance on the “shopfloor” will help him to “see” what he needs to “see”.

Utilizing this insight and construct in my evaluation, and given the nature of work process in the refinery, the structure of learning and training programme of the Corporation, learning and skill transfer remained essentially an experiential type characterised by coaching, mentoring and “do it yourself in the process-plants. This empirical analysis is therefore concerned with examining how these dimensions were played out during the long career path of the workers in the Corporation. Indeed, various learning and training programmes of the Corporation namely; the Graduate Trainees’ Induction, Induction programme for Experienced Hires, Foundation Leadership Development Programme (FLDP), Senior Officers’ Transition programme (SOTP) and the Chief Officers’ Management Development Programme (COMDP) were all designed to enhance skill development for “seamless transition” from one stage to another in the career progressions of all categories of workers in the NNPC. The central idea behind the programme had been to identify and emphasis the “critical dimensions” of skill transition needs, across levels in the trajectory of workers career advancement while on the job. The refinery’s oil process and production unit, referred to as Process Plants, remains the point of evaluation of skill and experiential learning development for this study. It was here that the practical skills acquired had to match the emerging challenges of work process required for effective performance.

4. CONCLUSION

This Paper has shown how emerging challenges and developments in the work-process and managerial practices in NNPC have resulted in specific responses from the Management in respect of skill formation and training needs. With changes in technology of production, accompanied by normative concern for improved performance, there has been a renewed focus on recruitment and retention of a “credentialised” set of workers across the hierarchical and occupational groups, which also necessitated a more “advanced” training and learning programme for the graduate trainees, for example, and for those in supervisory positions. The emerging types of different layers of occupational groups with different qualification and training backgrounds are associated with varying degrees of “practices” of sub-communities in “communities for practices” in the NNPC. Consequently, the prevailing “sector-based” training and practices in the Corporation that take into consideration, orientation and expectations of the occupational groups also have implications for training and learning needs which the unions normatively embrace or contest. In the prevailing circumstances of NNPC, where training and development are conceived with renewed emphasis, there will be limited but also “restricted” ways in which the unions will have to engage with workplace learning agenda. Operating challenges in NNPC continue to call for the need to up-grade skills of some members of the Plant Operators, while “new” graduate employees, with tertiary educational background readily and often benefit from learning programmes. The different levels and hierarchical layers of which occupational groups are formed, with different educational background were a contentious issue for unions’ involvement in learning agenda in the corporation. In other words, the different skills-profiles and occupational identities of workers shaped by different educational and skill backgrounds established “occupational boundaries”, thereby creating challenges for the two Branch unions in engaging with management on issues of training and workplace learning. This was recurrently made reference to by NUPENG Chairman, who never minced words on how the above have become areas of concern amongst his members in all the Branches. In NNPC, where Management’s prerogative predominates, even under the “social partnership” arrangement, Unions still find it difficult to “break in”, in shaping training agenda in favour of these different occupational groups and identities. Also, as empirical evidence suggests, and where traditional methods and concerns of Unions’ representation still focus on terms and conditions of employment for the different groups, serious engagements with management on training issues might continue to occupy a secondary position.

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