

# Gender equity in learning at and through work: Insights from volunteer fire fighting<sup>1</sup>

Lewis B. Hughes, Enviro-sys, Australia

Paper presented at the European Conference on Education Research, Istanbul, Turkey, 10-13 September 2013

## Abstract

Whilst educationalists are alert to the potential for significant workplace learning, others with capacity to influence acting upon this may not recognise that a workplace is a place of learning beyond skills training to do the job. However, this is not to say that 'others' are all blind to the potential for increased enterprise productivity and enhanced self-image by individuals. The others referred to especially include leaders (of varying rank) as became apparent upon revisiting research data accrued in the course of a 2002 to 2005 exploration of what might increase the likelihood of a Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteer to remain as a volunteer.

The 2002 to 2005 research had as its focus *Enhanced organisational achievement through making the most of what a person knows and can do as an outcome from their lifelong learning*. The CFA exploration was a facet of a wider study; however the implications were profound in terms of volunteer numbers, self-image, and community safety. A model for organisation achievement– the LCM Achievement Model enmeshing valuing of learning outcomes (L) with valuing a workplace culture supporting this (C) and valuing motivations (M)- was the outcome from the totality of the research (Hughes 2007). The research was ethnographic and data was viewed through a Cultural Historic Activity Theory (CHAT) prism.

Exploration of the broad efficacy of the LCM Achievement Model is continuing and includes strengthening the social capital outcomes from the delivery of vocational education and training (VET) in learning institution and workplace settings. It is the workplace settings aspect, and looking beyond formal learning, which has caused deepened exploration of learning at and through work -initially, with women especially in mind. Also, as for the VET and Social Capital research of Hughes and Hughes (2011, 2012), European nuances are also under exploration and includes the melding of work-based learning with formal education outcomes as is under-addressed through recognition of prior learning processes in an Australian context.

Although women were the original focus of revisiting research data (for text publication purposes) the accruing insights add weight to the view that there is much to be gained by pursuing equity in learning at and through work in a manner which is not gender divided – i.e. the sought equity is not about women as a 'need' group, but is about nurturing of learning at and through work by men and women. In this respect, it has emerged that the nurturing of learning disposition of workplace leaders (men and women) is at the core of the issue. Noting that this quality in leaders is not gender determined, some male leaders are nurturing in nature and some men are not. Likewise, some women leaders are nurturing in nature and some women are not.

It is acknowledged that the above nurturing findings are not a great surprise. However, the goal is motivating/supporting workplace action in respect of gender equity in learning at and through work; and drawing upon the LCM Achievement Model, as a component of the tool/artefact element of interacting activity systems in embedding nurturing dispositions, does have promise.

## **Introduction**

This paper opens with a proposition that lifelong learning is as much about learning at and through work as it is about continuing with one's formal education to maintain employment capability and to be an empowered contributor to society throughout life<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, the following discussion is a contribution to the whys and wherefores of valuing learning at and through work and the prospect of closer valuing ties between formal and informal learning.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is work-in-progress toward an invited chapter for inclusion in a SENSE Publishers text 'Work based learning and women: Is there a place for women in workplace and work-based learning?'

<sup>2</sup> Even though formal education focused, the snapshot overview of lifelong learning in post-socialist countries (Kozlovskiy, Voorman & Roosalu (eds) 2010) offers much cause for reflection in terms of economic vitality and social cohesion accruing from lifelong learning as an embedded value within society. Also, Svendsen and Svendsen (2004) offers much to reflect upon regarding connection between social capital and economic productivity.

In the period 2002 to 2005, as a core component of PhD candidacy, exploration was undertaken as to why a Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteer remains as a volunteer – the overall research being, intuitively, directed at the relationship between lifelong learning of an individual and organisational achievement (Hughes 2007a). In the CFA researched case, retention of volunteers was the organisational achievement goal. And in respect of this paper, although voluntary, a CFA brigade is indeed a workplace and requires high levels of competency, commitment and trust between colleagues.

Further to asserting that a CFA brigade is a workplace, there is logic in the proposition that knowledge (leading to action) of what causes a volunteer to remain at work has high extrapolation utility to circumstance where a person is not so free (need to earn a living, etc.) to choose whether they remain or go. And arising from the finding that learning leadership is profoundly important with respect to learning at and through work, this research led to the proposition that if one can lead a CFA volunteer workforce, one can lead exceptionally well in more conventional workplaces where volunteerism doesn't apply. If a CFA volunteer doesn't respect their brigade leadership they can simply pick up their bucket and go home if other reasons to remain are not overwhelmingly compelling.

Importantly, the research made explicit the power of an individual valuing the outcomes of their lifelong learning, and that of others, as a major factor in having a willingness to contribute to organisational achievement – having resonance with cultivating community of practice (Wenger et al. 2002). This applies across gender and requires recognition that, in addition to structured training, much is learnt in the course of undertaking work beyond what is immediately relevant to the work at hand (Cairns & Stephenson 2009). In addition to potential future application in the current workplace<sup>3</sup>, there is personal growth, with whole of life utility, accruing from learning at and through work where there is personal enthusiasm for the work – in sharp focus where community safety (the CFA case) is the work objective.

To illustrate, in this paper, what is meant by “learning at and through work” -

Throughout the CFA research, instances were commented upon where young men and women joined a brigade as volunteer recruits, acquired technical skills and grew in other aspects of their work and life capabilities. This was particularly life changing in instances of personal challenges such as immaturity, lack of confidence, or learning difficulties.

Whilst the foregoing mentioning of young people is in alignment with a shallow view that competency acquisition is primarily at the early stages of working life, in the course of the CFA research there was numerous anecdotal telling of mature age recruits expanding their stock of competencies and self-image through learning at and through the work of being a volunteer. For example, volunteers deliberately taking on roles which were in marked contrast to their salaried jobs and not drawing upon existing qualifications – in some instances as recreational relief, but with new learning deliberately sought or unconsciously accrued.

Irrespective of entry level status and motivations, through engagement across the spectrum of incidental learning to formal training, recruits learn much as a consequence

---

<sup>3</sup> There is a significant difference between just-in-time-training (where such is the rule) and learning. For me, just-in-time-training has its place, but is more related to the person as a machine than it is to the person being capable – through their learning - beyond machine-like robotic actions. It is improbable that you can train for every eventuality but you can learn to adapt and draw upon experience in new and challenging circumstances.

of their volunteering. Likewise, it is in the nature of emergency management volunteering<sup>4</sup> that the vagaries of events and evolving practices require continuous learning by all; therefore learning at and through work is both a requirement and a natural occurrence for all – irrespective of years of service or gender.

It should also be noted that recognition of prior learning (RPL) in the Australian vocational education and training (VET) system is a significant, but under-utilised, motivation to learn at and through work in a manner yielding evidence of competency. Advanced status in undertaking formal learning – even to the point of award of qualification – is available. Whilst the CFA was not actively promoting this, research into RPL as a pathway to valuing and applauding what volunteers know and can do (Hughes 2007b - unpublished) indicated much value for volunteers seeking formal qualifications in respect of employment away from volunteering. The availability of RPL also has much ‘awakening’ potential, in respect of learning through work, which is worthy of exploration in volunteering and conventional work environments (Hughes 2009).

#### Examples of CFA learning at and through work –

The growth in self-confidence expressed by Tracey, now a highly experienced CFA volunteer, is an example of learning at and through work. In this instance, the combination of structured training, informal learning, and inclusion by the brigade in its bonding activities led to personal development beyond the member’s joining expectation as indicated in the following exchange (pseudonyms used).

(Ted – brigade member)	<i>And when Tracey came here, she was so reserved.</i>
(Tracey – brigade member)	<i>And look at me now.</i>
(Ted)	<i>She has grown in confidence. She could almost call the Melbourne Cup [major horse race] if she wanted to.</i>
(Harry – brigade member)	<i>I was amazed. I am shocked at it - I still am.</i>

(281003, B275)<sup>5</sup>

Throughout researching contact with this brigade (spanning 8 months), Ted displayed a strong informal leadership engagement with nurturing access and equity values in the brigade. For example, the above exchange followed an earlier instance during the meeting where he assisted a young member to value what she brought to the brigade following her saying that, as a young person with little (in her view) life experience, she didn’t have much to offer. Also, in commenting upon the change in accepting / valuing women Ted said ‘...and there was a lot of dissention in the ranks about it. Not talking to them. Not training them. Not going to fires with them. But it [resistance to women members] fell apart. We have got women who joined who are good recruits. Showed their way and got positive support from the right places – from up top coming down; and the snowball just appeared.’ (281003, B395))

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the CFA is engaged in risk reduction in addition to emergency response. Also, the CFA turns out to road accident rescue, flood response, chemical spillage and other emergency incidents in addition to wild fire and structural fires.

<sup>5</sup> In this paper drawing from data is identified by a 6 digit date and position in transcript or tape.

These are not isolated CFA examples. They are but examples of learning-at-and-through-work leading to personal and workplace strengthening – not gender biased – within a large and complex institution. These examples are especially pertinent to making the point that, in addition to required work knowledge and skills and personal attributes such pride-in-self, justified confidence, being a lifelong learner and adding to brigade cohesiveness<sup>6</sup> developed in the course of work, much is acquired through work which has significant utility in a person's wider life. As expanded upon in this paper, a workplace with gender equity in nurturing learning at and through work contributes not only to the human capital (skill) asset of the workplace, but expands the social capital (cohesiveness) of a workplace and hence the community - substantially more so than is the case where gender bias exists and cohesiveness is thus disrupted. For this to occur, the gender equity embraces equality in nurturing the motivation to learn, learning how to learn, and the availability of the opportunity to learn.

In addition to the insights accrued from my lifelong learning and organisational achievement research, and prompted by a view that the delivery of VET in Australia can be enhanced by greater utilisation of learning partnerships, during 2009 and 2010 I undertook an autoethnographic review (Hughes 2010) of “the why” and “the how” of learning partnerships. This led to the realisation that fortuitous circumstances had placed me under the influence of others with predisposition to nurturing learning, by their colleagues, at and through work. Mostly, this was by individuals with authority in the workplace, but not always so. In some instances, these influential (upon my learning) colleagues didn't have formal authority, but through virtue of their experience and demeanour in supporting others they asserted informal leadership with respect to learning at and through work. These “nurturing” colleagues (with or without formal authority) were more than role models, mentors or coaches. They opened the path to motivation and confidence in reaching for new horizons in learning; and, importantly, they did this seemingly without gender bias. On reflection, these “nurturers” had an innate disposition and capacity to open and support learning pathways for others.

With my “fortuitous” realisations in mind, there is much to be gained by collating, and sharing, examples of strengthened CFA brigade capability accruing from the collegiate supported personal growth of CFA volunteers (irrespective of gender) arising from the amalgam of learning at and through work. By this means, there is the probability of moving beyond luck in coming under the nurturing influence of another (as has applied in my life) to deliberate organisational action as is appropriate to the circumstances of differing brigade environments. It follows that, as a CFA brigade is as much a workplace as an office, a factory, or other place of work, CFA success cases have much extrapolation value in respect of other workplaces.

The 1,218<sup>7</sup> CFA brigade workplaces are not all alike. There are differences in styles of elected leadership, differences in the community pool from which volunteers are drawn, differences in the nature of community safety strengthening needs and opportunities, and other local factors. Therefore, a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to apply; however, examples do

---

<sup>6</sup> See Hughes and Hughes (2012) for discussion of the ‘want’ for a VET graduate to possess social capital attributes beyond just the human capital items of knowledge and skill. It is reasonable to extrapolate that these findings are equally a matter of ‘want’ when the learning is at and through work. In this respect, there is resonance with the Marko Radovan alerting to the relationship between powerful learning environments and self-motivation and skills (Radovan 2010) and the undercurrent theme – albeit focused upon formal education - of the relationship between lifelong learning and social cohesion which I posit abides in the Kozlovski, Voormann and Roosalu (eds) (2010) collation of policies and practices of lifelong learning in post-socialist countries.

<sup>7</sup> At 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013 (CFA website): 1218 brigades, 32,729 male operational volunteers, 5,370 female operational volunteers, 11,448 male non-operational volunteers, 5,864 female non-operational volunteers.

provide a base which is both “change” motivational and strategically informing. Also, CFA case studies do have extrapolation value for other workplaces which may, in many instances, be less complex. The view - *If you can lead a CFA brigade you can lead anywhere* – as was variously expressed and evidenced in the course of the CFA research has truth in its meaning as applies to both male and female leaders and their leading of both men and women.

## Research Approach

The revisiting of data - previously yielded through ethnographic orientated interviews, group meetings, and projects – has a questioning orientation. In this respect, challenging previously held views on the way things are is the core of seeking deeper insights. In this respect, Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a research theoretical foundation has particular utility as, even, casual conversation reveals that the cultural and historical features- tensions and contradictions - of a CFA brigade are highly influential upon the manner of its functioning. CHAT also has utility as it is both a framework for challenging understanding and then action to sustain and enhance brigade performance – in this case, through equity in workplace learning.

### The CHAT logic

The Hughes (2007a) CFA data has been revisited with a focus upon what it reveals regarding gender equity in learning at and through work and serving the objective of community safety. This has been done mindful of the Engestrom (2001) expansive learning four questions –

- Who are the subjects of learning?
- Why do they learn?
- What do they learn?
- How do they learn?

In activity system terms (Figure 1) seeking expanded capability - –  
The Subject is *People learning at and through work*;  
The Object is *Gender equity in learning at and through work*;  
Rules; Community; and Division of Labour are probed as environmental determinants and influences; and the quest has been for Tool/Artifact – noting that the LCM Achievement Model (see later), coupled with leaderful organisation attributes (Raelin 2003), has been found to have utility in coupling lifelong learning to organisational achievement (Hughes 2007a).

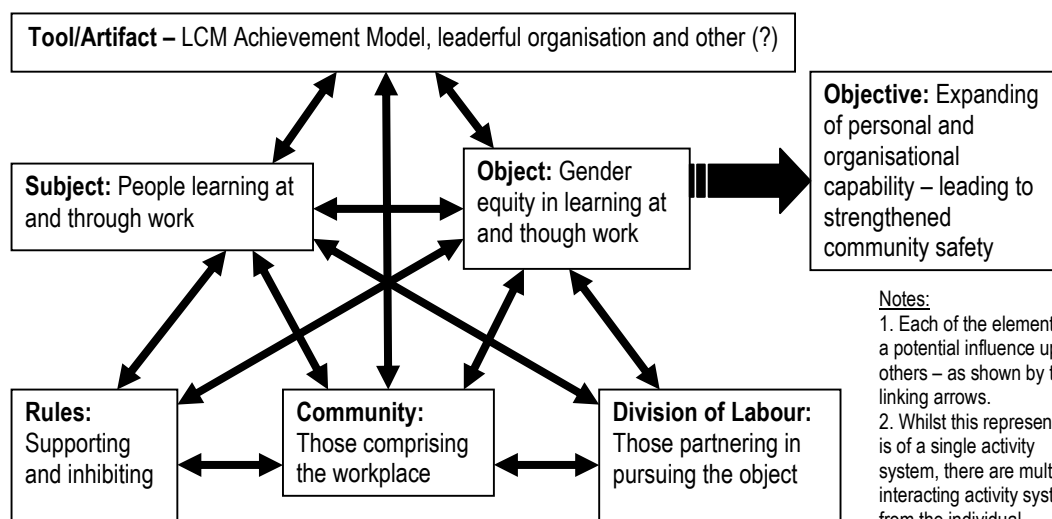


Figure 1 – Activity system representation of learning at and through work

In addition to yielding insights informing this paper, the going-forward process is centred upon the view that the presence of nurturing orientated workplace leadership is the prime factor in achieving equity in learning at, and through, work. Accordingly, further opportunities are being pursued to engage stakeholders in challenging this view – confirmation or otherwise being sought.

### Making the implicit explicit

Whilst it is stating the obvious that maximising a team's success is largely an outcome from *all-in-the-team* effort, this is vulnerable to being back-of-mind valued and complacency that all is well. For example, overlooking diminishing availability of people who have been relied upon as the core of a team is a particular complacency hazard. In the case of the CFA, demographic and other volunteer availability changes -especially diminishing number of men who can quickly respond to day time call out - have obliged a shift in attitude that women too can be firefighters. For example, in parts of rural Victoria, men have sought off-farm employment so as to supplement farm income and are not as able to quickly respond to fire call-out as was previously the case; so it is now newly important that the women who have remained on the farm during the day are available for local emergency response call out.

In an earlier time, Helen's (pseudonym – CFA volunteer – H050304, lines 29-38) raising the example of a woman keen to join the brigade but overlooked, even though her husband was invited, illustrates a male orientation which is now necessarily largely in the past. However, in the needs-must transition period there was an example raised of a rural brigade where the men (at work some distance away) allowed the women to drive fire trucks to the fire ground but would take over on their arrival – issues of gender balance do take time.

*Sometimes when people are actually asked [what they bring and what they might contribute], it gives them a sense of value but it also helps direct what a brigade can do, how much they can do, what skills they can utilise within the brigade. And sometimes by doing that, it will encourage a volunteer to learn more.*

(Helen H050304, tape: 047)



In the course of research informing this paper, it was noticeable that where a brigade had explicit processes in place to discover what a new volunteer brought by way of competencies, motivations and interests there was across gender valuing of self and others. In comparison, anecdotal comments indicated that brigade cohesion was questionable where there was only implicit valuing of what people know and can do; and gender equity reforming leaders confronted challenges to bring back-of-mind valuing into the explicit realm of action where brigade culture change was required.

In generically drawing upon a CFA brigade as an environment where there is great importance in explicit valuing of all – men and women, this is not to say that all CFA brigades do exhibit this attribute. Across the diversity of 1,217 brigades and approximately 45,000 volunteers, like all large organisations, there is a spectrum of “poor” through “could be better” to “lead practice” in respect of gender equity matters. Accordingly, there is much to commend in awakening explicit awareness that there is gain from gender-equal valuing of present capability and potential. This is especially the case in the CFA as the male volunteers are aging and there are other attractions for younger men – the female potential volunteer pool is under-drawn upon.

In view of the foregoing, this paper posits that the act of overtly valuing what people know and can do has high potential to lift organisational achievement; and this does involve explicit valuing of men and women as equal partners in this achievement. Whilst this is obvious, the reality is that there is a preponderance of only implicitly valuing the capability of all and thus a probability of not being acted upon – you think it’s so, but it’s not so.

### **Being valued – men and women – as the core proposition leading to workplace learning equity**

In the course of the CFA research, in both urban and rural brigades, the brigade environment was frequently referred to as being that of a “family”. Even though an urban (significant centre of population) volunteer does not have community expectation upon them, as applies in the case of a small rural community, the family-like bonding appears to arise from a high sense of purpose and necessary trust in one another. And it was not uncommon for an urban volunteer to have joined for one reason (sometimes because it looked exciting) and remained for another – they found a family.

There is a great deal of meaning in the “*I found a family*” position frequently articulated by a CFA volunteer. This only hints at the complexity of leadership which is responsive, in a valuing sense, on and off the fire ground (or other place of emergency) to individual vagaries as entwine to forge the group norm. In essence, a highly cohesive CFA brigade workplace is one in which there is strong valuing of what each member knows and can do and the commitment which they have to contribute this to the team. Importantly, this mutual valuing has currency across the spectrum of non-emergency activity though to emergency response. Accordingly, learning equity and drawing-from equity is the glue which binds the brigade and has much resonance with other workplaces where group cohesiveness is a determinant of outcomes.

On the occasions when fires are being fought, there is a requirement for a very high level of CFA volunteer trust in one another<sup>8</sup>; however, this not only applies at the fire front but is

---

<sup>8</sup> Noting, also, that CFA volunteers team with salaried firefighting and salaried support personnel. Whilst this paper focusses upon volunteers, the equity in learning issue is equally applicable to CFA salaried staff and there are impacting operational cohesiveness factors across the volunteer/salaried team. For example, there is resistance in the CFA to describing salaried firefighters as professional and not so describing volunteers as this would imply that volunteer firefighters have a lesser level of competency or being less committed/ trustworthy.

important in respect of those who are in support. In respect of other workplaces, the environment of a CFA brigade aligns to circumstances where individual and group capability is coupled with commitment – surely all workplaces, if we can assign a personality, would aspire to this if awakened to the possibilities.

In the introduction to this paper, the holistic learning at and through work possibilities of a CFA brigade were highlighted. With this in mind, the following dialogue (pseudonyms used) reinforces the argument that there is much to be gained in valuing of self, and being valued by others, through learning at and through work.

- |                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| Ambrose (CFA staff member)   | <i>Training equals knowledge. Knowledge equals competence. Which equals morale. And when you add it all up it equals retention.</i>   |
| Martin (long term volunteer) | <i>“But I am only a volunteer though” [examplifying what a volunteer might say]</i>   |
| Norm (long term volunteer)   | <i>You mentioned earlier the new recruit. One of our new volunteers, he wouldn’t say two words all day – wouldn’t say two words all day. It was taken to be that he had a lack of confidence – or whatever. He acquired [inaudible]. Done all of his project training , went away on the last stint to the North East – was on the slip- on units. I was a bit concerned, but he went. And he and another fellow went away. Because he had the skills, he was put in a position where he was able to demonstrate and to use them. And he came back. And he is about six foot off the ground – he is up there now. And his esteem, his ---</i> |
| Tim (CFA staff member)       | <i>Grown in himself.</i>  |
| Norm (long term volunteer)   | <i>Yeh! And his position within the brigade and everything has lifted. His father rang me to say “What have they done to him? Have they been feeding him steroids?”</i>   |

(190303, LTB207)

There are also instances of women volunteers for whom life changing outcomes have occurred. For both men and women, being offered and undertaking training is a significant component of self-valuing and being valued by others; and hence a foundation element in organisational achievement. Likewise, having opportunity to informally learn and being motivated to act upon the opportunity is similarly important to the individual and the organisation.

Drawing from the CFA brigade workplace environment, this paper is an argument for valuing what all – men and women - bring to the activity of meeting organisational objectives. It follows from this that the contribution to knowledge, skills and attitudes<sup>9</sup> acquired at work are

---

<sup>9</sup> Noting that ‘attitudes’ is a value-laden term; and the intent here is that these attitudes mutually serve the interest of the individual, the organisation and the community.



profoundly important; and having other than gender equity in this regard is unfathomable. Why would an organisation deliberately under-fuel (training and other learning being the fuel) part of its workforce? Therefore, surely it follows that gender equity in learning at and through work is more than just important – it is an organisational achievement imperative.

Whilst there are still undoubtedly instances where gender influences the valuing of a member of a working community, and the expectation is that this works more to the disadvantage of women than to men, the wasteful discriminatory practices of past days are firmly discredited. We have come so far – but not yet finished the journey – that the following 1923 statement from the Public Service Arbitrator (as follows) invites incredulity that such could be formally recorded.

*“The general experience throughout the world, as indicated by statistics published in many countries, is that the effective service of women is considerably below that of men, even in the same occupation, and that this is due principally to (1) loss of service through marriage, (2) greater absences on account of sickness, and (3) sapping vitality of unmarried women at an earlier age of life.*

*While the expectation of life is greater in the case of women than of men, the effective service of women ceases at an earlier age. If these factors are taken into account, equal services to those of men are not as a general rule rendered by women.’* (Australian Public Service Commission, Office of Women 2006, p. 3)

In contrast to the foregoing 1923 view, in the four years of my CFA research which included multiple contact with 69 CFA volunteer and staff personnel, there was never a questioning – in the sense that it was now opposed - of the increasing involvement of women in operational activities. However, there were occasional indications of tensions (to be expected) when a workplace is accommodating to women as equal partners in previously male only roles. Being alert to the possibility of sexual harassment and sharing authority across genders are examples of arising issues.

In being optimistic, I do acknowledge that my CFA insights are informed by people willing to share views regarding volunteer retention; and, hence, having a predisposition to valuing people irrespective of gender. Therefore, it could be said that this paper presents only one side of the coin. However, notwithstanding the probability that in such a large and diverse organisation there is undisclosed resistance to gender equity, the presence of gender equity in the brigades encountered bodes well – this is an “equity” foundation upon which to build.

It is perhaps significant that on the two especially convened occasions for sharing volunteer retention views of 16 brigade captains (8 long serving, 8 newly elected), within one region, women as volunteers was not raised as a problematic issue. However, with the benefit of hindsight, I should have explored why women were not represented at either of these two meetings. Notwithstanding this lapse on my part, the apparent now irrelevance of gender is illustrated by a captain (male) making only passing relevance to a volunteer being female when applauding doing the right thing. The applauding of capability did not appear to be gender related; or if it was, the captain may have been seeking to quietly underscore valuing of “his girls”.

*'... it was one of my girls and she has just got her license and she did the right thing [as a driver]. She stayed on the hard track. She didn't get into the paddock. And that's what it was, it was actually a peat fire and she didn't head out there until she got extra crew.'*

(Male captain 120204, B1 109)

Drawing upon the long serving captains (all male), sharing views regarding retaining volunteers, there is clearly a great deal of satisfaction in a brigade leader supporting a volunteer (male or female) in their personal growth; and this has the reward to the brigade of getting something back in return (110204, 598). Later, in the same sharing of views, the importance of acknowledging contributions by members and overtly valuing this by offering additional training was an agreed sentiment (110204, B823 and B830).

Among the newly elected CFA brigade captains (all male), there was a consensus view that relieving the management load through delegation is a survival imperative for a captain; and this required creating a sense of project ownership by individuals and teams within the brigade (120204, 859). Indeed, one captain made the point *'I've become a better leader by stepping back and doing less'* to which there were nods of agreement. As more women join brigades – compelled in some circumstances by reduced availability of men - it follows that relieving the management load will increasingly involve women being elected to leadership roles.

In addition to declining farm incomes causing men to seek off-farm employment (raised earlier) farms are being amalgamated for economy of scale purposes which is leading to declining local populations. This has led to a necessity for women to become active volunteer firefighters to make up the numbers in responding to fire events. And even beyond the small rural CFA brigades, employment obligations are reducing the commitment that people (men and women) can give to being an active member of a CFA brigade. Whilst this has an echo relationship to past wartime circumstances where women replaced absent men, I suggest that this is occurring at time when the earlier conditions of protecting male roles no longer apply; and there will not be a CFA workplace retreat from valuing women equally with men – noting that this does not imply that, necessarily, there will be a gender balance in terms of number across all brigades. In this way, the instances of brigade gender equivalence of valuing CFA women and men are a weathervane of workplace change in which there is an expectation of gender equity in learning at and through work.

### **Leadership as a nurturing function**

Clearly, and beyond just a CFA brigade, there is organisational achievement logic in having in place a workplace environment where people are supported in personal growth and hence strengthening of self-valuing. Having cause for overt valuing by leaders and peers is enhanced where learning through work and at work is an embedded quality of the workplace; and gender equity in this regard is an imperative. If gender equity doesn't exist, its absence is akin to having a hole in the bucket.

Whilst *"the hole in the bucket"* metaphor has obvious relevance to firefighting, CFA volunteers contribute to the community in broader ways. In particular, engagement with the community in acting to strengthen community safety is on-going and draws upon capabilities brought to the brigade by a volunteer and the capabilities which a volunteer accrues as a consequence of their CFA structured training and informal learning (Hughes & Henry 2003). In this respect, leading volunteers in expanding their capabilities and drawing upon their capabilities (no matter how acquired) is a core function of a brigade captain and/or other persons in the

brigade with a formal leadership role. There is the possibility that this function is seen by some, in positions of authority, as “giving orders”. Whereas others may see it more as a nurturing of justified self-esteem and commitment to *draw upon what is known and can be done* in alignment with achieving organisational goals as apply from time to time. In this paper, I argue that what applies in the volunteer environment of the CFA is readily extrapolated to other workplaces.

As mentioned earlier, leadership in the CFA is very demanding. One aspect of this is the requirement for command-and-control on the fireground and a motivational influencing of volunteers off the fireground. This requires a high level of dexterity in nurturing self-esteem and commitment which can be relied upon under circumstances of great stress and when such pressure is not immediately pressing. In balance, the research into retaining volunteers suggests that a nurturing approach to strengthening capability through valuing learning and its outcomes lays the foundation upon which success in organisational achievement can be constructed. Whilst not intended as gender orientated, I think of the “nurturing” orientation as feminine in character as compared to the insensitivity of what could be described as “macho” in the Australian vernacular.

Alerting to the “feminine” influence upon organisational achievement first emerged in the recounting by Pamela, a CFA brigade captain, of a request by a female member to become more active as a firefighter against a background of being suppressed in this regard by previous male leadership. The conversation was recounted as -

*‘...and she has rung me up twice in the last couple of months when we have had total fire ban days to say that she will be available .... if I need a crew or if I think she is competent to go out. And I said “Gail, do you feel confident that you can go out?” and she said “Yes, I do” well then I said “Well then I am confident, yes, she can do the job”. So, yes, she has made herself available to go out on strike team.*

(Pamela, brigade captain, 202003, 2A448)

And later in conversation about the appearance of Pamela (pseudonym) having had a “nurturing” leadership role in culture change at the brigade, Pamela said – “*I won’t ask someone to do something that they don’t think they can do. So she asked me “Do you think I could do it?” So that is back to you “Gail. Do you think you can do the job?”* (200203, 2B579). It was evident that Pamela’s approach to leadership is to encourage, empower and support members of the brigade in expanding their learning and contributing horizons – members become even more valued within the “family” of the brigade.

Teaming two young male recruits (having reading and writing weakness) with a junior female seeking a “valued” place within the brigade is another example of Pamela’s nurturing approach.

*‘I have a couple of new members who can’t read – have trouble reading and writing – and they are, like, adult, younger members. And I have a junior member – one junior member – so I often send her out to do the checklist on the truck with the guys and she reads through the check list and then they go and tick it off. They say yes it’s here, it’s here. So they check it and she does the reading and ticks it off. So she feels important because she is contributing even though she is the only junior. And then they are feeling*

*important, and learning, because they are checking off the stuff but not actually having to do something that they can't do.'*

(Pamela, brigade captain, 200203, 2A737)

It seemed that Pamela, as a brigade captain (which was itself, at the time, a significant overturning of gender role within the brigade), has an encouraging disposition and is alert and committed to her role in empowering and supporting Gail (and others – male and female) in the required training, informal learning, and achieving acceptance as a firefighter and/or other role within the brigade. Prompted by Pamela's captaincy, I was on the alert for other instances of nurturing learning and the valuing its outcomes. It emerged that this is not always under the influence of a formally authorised leader<sup>10</sup> and is not gender determined. Members without a leadership title assert a nurturing influence and some men are as nurturing as some women. And it can be the case that some women are more "male like" (macho) in their approach to leadership than is commonly thought to be the female stance.

Having been alerted to the "nurturing" nature of Pamela's leadership, it emerged that there are many examples of CFA men and women supporting colleagues in a nurturing manner which are markedly different to a male, macho like, stance. For example-

- Mary (pseudonym) commented upon the importance of her colleagues (male and female) within the brigade reassuring her of her worth (in terms of what she knew and can do) at a time when she had significant self-doubt and personal crisis - *'I don't think we realise all of the knowledge and skills that we have. It is only when something goes really, really, wrong that when people come to you --- Like I had a crisis in my life. And all of a sudden people came to me and said how valuable I was; what a good human being I was; what value I was to them. And I thought -- "I didn't even know that this person liked me" I had no idea of the things that they thought I did well. I didn't even realise it.'*

(Mary, informal leader, 190303, LTB120)

It was apparent that in both her CFA volunteering, paid work and other aspects of her life, Mary had a disposition to nurturing self-valuing and learning. One aspect of Mary being alert to supporting others (and without a formally designated leadership role) was associated with her comment regarding the need to support some volunteers in the assessment phase of their learning -

*'... they [CFA recruits with low self-confidence with respect to learning] look at the assessment tasks and they don't think they're achievable for themselves. Though part of it is to make them [training objectives] appear achievable to those people who fear failure as well. And some of our training ... our assessment tools are very complicated.'*

(Mary, informal leader, 190303, B272)

It is probable that some women who have not engaged with learning for many years will be nervous. And this applies to both men and women – especially where they have workplace literacy and numeracy weaknesses. As the group discussion progressed it was evident that Mary was alert to a broad range of inhibitors and intent upon supporting her

<sup>10</sup> See Raelin (2003) regarding leaderful organisations in which informal leadership is valued and is concurrent with formally designated leaders – i.e. all have a potential role in leadership which supports organisational achievement and, amongst other things, acknowledges validity in the views of colleagues.

colleagues in their learning and growing in self-esteem with due regard to hurdles and opportunities.

- Jack (pseudonym -a brigade officer) exhibited a nurturing approach to leadership, as illustrated by -

*'... the captain's wife you are saying wasn't allowed to do anything. Now he has stood down. It is exactly the same in our brigade. Our brigade captain finished up years ago, his wife was the coms [communications] officer since Jesus played full back for Jerusalem, you know, and she was coms officer extraordinaire "But don't you dare go near that truck. I don't want to see you at a burn-off or nothing"; and she was kept under the thumb. You would know who I am talking about. Well she is getting on [aging] a little bit now and she has been training with me now for three months and you couldn't stop her if you hit her on the head with a stick, She is just so keen because he has gone his own way and she is on her own and she said "Look, I have missed out on this for yonks, can I do it?" and I said as long as you can physically do it and you want to do it, we will show you .... '*

(Jack, brigade officer, 200203, 2A606)

In this instance, Jack was adding to the sharing of views regarding supporting volunteers in their growing and contributing activity as a component of maintaining commitment to the brigade.

In the course of the CFA research, it became evident that there is a profound, cohesion building, influence of both formal and informal leadership within a brigade. It became evident that acknowledging what volunteers brought to the brigade, and what they acquired through both structured training and informal learning from membership of the brigade, was a key factor in retaining volunteers. This applies to both women and men CFA volunteers; and, I suggest, applies in workplaces other than the CFA.

In my autoethnographic review of learning partnerships (Hughes 2010), the learning and opportunity equity environment nurtured by Roy Morris, Managing Director of Statewide Building Society (at the time, Victoria's largest), was revealed as an exemplar for its time of organisational achievement underpinned by equity in learning at and through work – indeed, gender, ethnicity and other personal differences were irrelevant to opportunity. With the benefit of hindsight I now recognise that Roy acted according to a belief that an organisation grew in lock-step with the growth of its people – all of its people. There is much to reflect upon in that the breadth of personal stories of Statewide people growing under the nurturing influence of Roy did not emerge until much later and after this could be said to him – I knew my own story, but until much later didn't know the story of others.

In retrospect, I can identify the CFA revealed elements of *family*, *trust* and *commitment* in the growth of Statewide Building Society under the nurturing influence of Roy Morris. And I invite the reader to reflect upon their own experience of instances where they too have encountered this in organisational settings – noting that sometimes this might be in pockets within the organisation more so than across the organisation. Further, I invite the reader to reflect upon the nature of the leadership – formal and informal – which underpinned these outcomes. Was the leadership “nurturing” and “gender equity” in character?

## **Taking action - The LCM Achievement Model as a device to construct gender workplace learning equity as a foundation for organisational achievement**

Whilst this paper has a core of CFA women and men as firefighters, CFA volunteers are engaged in much more than firefighting in respect of adding to community safety. Therefore the learning at and through work for a CFA volunteer is broad ranging. With this in mind, I suggest that extrapolating, to other workplaces, from the CFA theme of this paper is valid. Maximising organisational achievement requires gender equity in setting workplace learning objectives and supporting pursuit of these objectives.

In their text *Capable Workplace Learning* (Cairns & Stephenson 2009) Len Cairns and John Stephenson draw upon many years of research into the implications and application of the notion of 'capability' which arose from the 1980 Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) adoption of a Capability Manifesto. The RSA Manifesto has, at its core, raising concern for an apparent imbalance between what is understood to be "education" and what is understood to be "training" (Cairns & Stephenson 2009, p. 9). Arising from this, John Stephenson – during and beyond his role as the Foundation Director of the United Kingdom Higher Education for Capability project – articulated capability as integration of knowledge, skills and personal qualities used effectively and appropriately in response to varied, familiar and unfamiliar circumstances – i.e.

Capability is having justified confidence in your ability to:

- \* take appropriate and effective action
- \* communicate effectively
- \* collaborate with others
- \* learn from experiences

in changing and unfamiliar circumstances.

(Cairns & Stephenson 2009, p. 9)

At this point, and although merely flagging a related topic worthy of further exploration, for some (if not many) beneficiaries of gender equity in learning at and through work there is a connection between the workplace generated enthusiasm for learning and going on to achieve formal qualification. In this respect, the Hughes and Cairns (2013) advocacy that Australian apprentices graduate as being 'capably competent' is an example of what can occur when rich and equitable learning occurs in the workplace and in formal education environments.

On the matter of differences of view regarding "education" and "training", for me "education" is the enclosing holistic learning activity which affords "capability" in drawing from and applying outcomes from focused "training" as a "capable" person. This said, and by way of further explanation, vocational education and training (VET) in Australia has advocates of just-in-time training which would see delivery narrowly focused upon skill (as required in the moment) and the further evaporation of the "E" in VET.

For me, graduating VET learners without capability attributes would put Australia in a very dangerous place of being stuck in the moment with a workforce which is skilled but not capable. Alternatively, in Australia, we can look to "learning" in the workplace as a salvation rather than an addition to nurturing a "capable" workforce and the associated cohesive society (Hughes & Hughes 2013). However, taking an optimistic view, in Australia there is much potential for stronger partnership between the workplace and VET in which people learning at



and through work – if they so desire as lifelong learners – can receive VET credit for what they know and can do across a broad range of learning – reaching beyond the confines of current or past job.

My optimism resonates with the Cairns and Stephenson (2009, p. 30) identification of enriching opportunities for learning at and through work such as online learning and greater flexibility by learning institutions in accepting the integration of formal and informal learning. Accordingly, where an employer looks to strengthening organisational capability through strengthened workforce capability, mutual gain beckons by employer and employee in strengthening learning partnerships within and beyond the workplace; and learning –nurturing - leadership within the workplace has a pivotal role in this regard.

We all have experienced and grown from nurturing leadership but may, at the time, not have explicitly recognised it as such. From this position, I suggest that there is much to be gained by action which builds upon our experiences; and offer the LCM Achievement Model as a device for strategic planning and action in respect of gender equity in learning at and through work.

My 2002 to 2005 research into the relationship between lifelong learning and organisational achievement yielded a model as shown in Figure 2 (Hughes 2007a). This research was conducted within the water industry, the contract cleaning and waste management industries and the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA). It should be noted that this model emerged from insights relating to “what doesn’t work” as much as “what does work”. In the case of the CFA it was not surprising that, in such a large and complex organisation in which there are varying brigade cultures, disquiet regarding lines of communication and variations in the way in which people were valued emerged as significant inhibitors of cohesiveness across the organisation. As an example, and given that much of the research occurred during and just after a major bush fire event engulfing the North East of Victoria, there were a number of instances where research respondents remarked upon the way in which previously held doubts - of one group in respect of another - evaporated upon joining on the fireground and finding mutual respect as brothers and sisters in arms

Shaped by researching inhibitors and generators applying to making the most of what people know and can do in the pursuit of organisational achievement, the LCM Achievement Model emerged. With respect to the learning at and through work with gender equity focus of this paper, the model is gender neutral. The model is grounded in a stance that women and men are equally valued; and, in instances where this is not the case, investigative application of the model will reveal this and inform action to recover from the loss to all from such inequity.

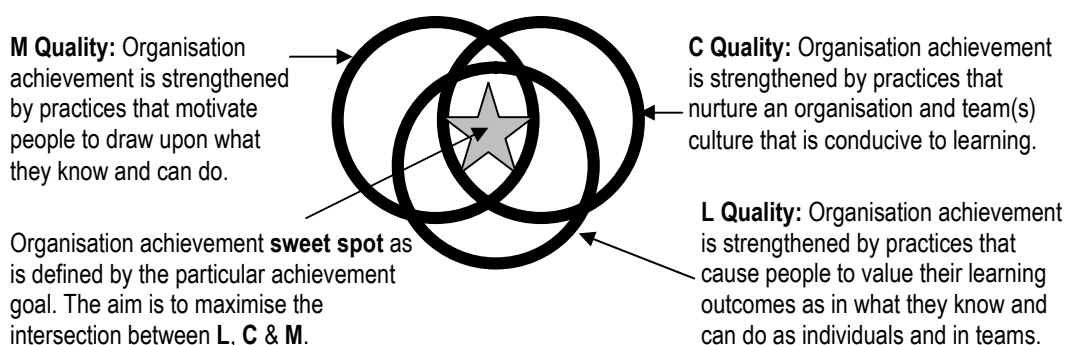


Figure 2 – The LCM Achievement Model (Hughes 2007a): Strengthening organisational achievement through better drawing upon what people know and can do

In the “awakened” instance of explicitly valuing gender equity in access to learning at work and through work, the operation of the LCM Achievement Model is as follows –

- Define the sweet spot as – **“Men and women having equal opportunity for learning at and through work”**.

Cognisant that - 1) the capability and commitment of staff is strongly tied to building upon their knowledge and skill through structured training and informal learning, whilst at work; and 2) it is more than just a matter of equity that men and women are equally supported in this. Achievement by the organisation is derived by the efforts of men and women.

- It then follows that workplace practices should support both men and women in valuing the outcomes of their lifelong learning and that of others with whom they engage at work.

Is this the case in your organisation? If yes, is there advantage in strengthening? If no, what action can be taken?

- To achieve the foregoing, a leadership (formal and informal) nurturing culture is highly advantageous – arguably, necessary.

Is this the case in your organisation? If yes, is there advantage in strengthening? If no, what action can be taken?

- Knowing and valuing the underpinning motivations, which drive individual and group commitment to contribute, are key factors in creating and sustaining enthusiasm for engaging with the opportunities to learn at and through work.

Is this the case in your organisation? If yes, is there advantage in strengthening? If no, what action can be taken?

The foregoing questions are posed as, whilst CHAT was previously raised, in this paper (page 5), in the context of seeking understanding, an activity system approach has much utility in designing and implementing action which leads to strengthened / capability outcomes from learning at and through work.

### Closing comments

This paper opened with the proposition that lifelong learning is as much about learning at and through work as it is about continuing with one’s formal education to maintain employment capability and to be an empowered contributor to society throughout life. In pursuit of the economic and social benefits which accrue from gender equity in learning at and through work, outcomes from research into retaining Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteers have been drawn upon.

A CFA brigade is a workplace where there are critical outcomes from worker effort and failings where learning at work is not equitable. There are many aspects of the performance of a brigade which are iconic of effective management and team cohesiveness. For example, trust in one another and regard for personal differences are relationship glues, the ability to move between democratic brigade management process and command-and-control discipline on the fireground, and commitment to individual and brigade on-going learning are sustainability

imperatives. Accordingly, exploration of issues, tensions and contradictions – as made explicit by CHAT processes – supports and motivates conversation within the work environment and in stakeholder environments which strengthens these environments.

In drawing upon the CFA organisational environment, it is helpful to note that a volunteer member can remain or leave at whim. With this in mind, the influence of leadership which nurtures learning is a model worthy of consideration in respect of other workplaces – what works with volunteers invites consideration of the relationship to circumstances where the motivations to remain and contribute are, arguably, different and less strong. Accordingly the conversation comparisons afforded by the CFA volunteer case have much utility in looking to extrapolate to other workplaces.

Informed by research confirming the relationship between valuing the outcomes of lifelong learning and organisational achievement (Hughes 2007a), there is much to be gained by sustaining a workplace environment where all – irrespective of gender – are valued as learners and, hence, growing contributors to self and organisational achievement.

The above said, the LCM Achievement Model (Hughes 2007a) operating as an activity system tool / artifact is offered for consideration and application. In saying this, it is not suggested that the LCM Achievement Model is a stand-alone tool/artifact. Nurturing leadership is worthy of separate identification rather than just be inferred in the model.

Whilst the focus here has been upon the workplace as a place of learning, a vocational education and training (VET) institution is a companion place of learning – especially in dual systems such as exist in Germany; and it could be said that a VET teacher is a learning leader where a nurturing orientation has similarity to the organisation leader nurturing learning at and through work – likewise, the VET teacher - in 'leaderful' mode - is empowering all in the learning group to be leaders in the learning environment. However, as a concluding thought, this is offered as inviting exploration of the manner in which gender equity in learning at and through work can create a thirst for further learning of a formal nature – i.e. the workplace has the potential for being the origin of an unexpected learning journey to the benefit of the individual, the workplace, and the community beyond.

### **About the author**

Dr Lewis Hughes is the principal of Enviro-sys a consultancy dedicated to people and organisations making the most of what they know and can do in an economic and environmentally sustainable manner and with social equity. Lewis initially trained as a communications engineer before becoming a mathematics and science teacher. This was followed by a diverse career in manufacturing, financial services and consulting, but always with a strong core of individual and organisation capability building.

Since 1999, Lewis' principal engagement with vocational education and training has been as a quality assurance consultant in respect of learning design and facilitation. Lewis is a Life Member and past National President of the Australian Institute of Training and Development and is currently (2011) a member of the VISTA Association of VET Professionals Executive Committee.

## References

- Australian Public Service Commission (2006), *Lifting & raising the Bar*, Australian Public Service Commission, Office of Women, Canberra.
- Cairns, L.G. & Stephenson, J. (2009), *Capable Workplace Learning*, SENSE Publishers, the Netherlands.
- Engestrom, Y. (2001), Expansive Learning at Work: Toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization, *Journal of Education and Work*, Vol. 14, No 1.
- Hughes, L. (2007a), Applying outcomes of lifelong learning to organisational achievement, PhD Thesis, Deakin University – <http://www.deakin.edu.au/dro/view/DU:30023293> accessed 5<sup>th</sup> March 2011
- Hughes, L. (2007b), *RPL: A pathway to valuing and applauding what volunteers know and can do*, unpublished research on behalf of Volunteering Australia.
- Hughes, L. (2009), *RPL as a strengthening of learning outcomes and an “awakening” strategy*, presentation to TAFE Development Centre seminar, Melbourne.
- Hughes, L. (2010), *Learning Partnerships in VET: Acting upon the possibilities to deepen learning*, paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, Helsinki, 25-27 August 2010 – <http://www.b.shuttle.de/wifo/vetnet/ecer10.htm> accessed 5th March 2011
- Hughes L. and Henry J. (2003), ‘Volunteers as a learning bridgehead to the community’, in *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, Vol 18, No 4, November 2003, Emergency Management Australia, Mt. Macedon. – <http://www.em.gov.au/Documents/VolunteersasaLearningBridgehead.pdf> - accessed 7<sup>th</sup> July 2013
- Koslovskiy, V., Voormann, R., Roossalu, T. (eds) (2010), *Leaning in Transition: Policies and Practices of Lifelong Learning in Post-Socialist Countries*, Nauka, St Petersburg.
- Hughes, L.B. & Hughes, L.C. (2011), *Social capital building within a human capital focused VET system: an Australian case study strengthening the deaf community* – ECER 2011, Berlin – <http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv51643> - accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2013
- Hughes, L.B. & Hughes, L.C. (2012), *Social Capital and VET – Researching Coupling of ‘Want’ to ‘Need’: an Australian comparison with Europe* – ECER 2012, Cadiz – <http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv55018> - accessed 22nd July 2013
- Hughes, L. & Cairns, L.(2013), ‘Competency-Based Training in Australia: What Happened and Where Might We ‘Capably’ Go?’ in L. Deitmer, U. Hauschild, F. Rauner & H. Zelloth (Eds.), *The Architecture of Innovative Apprenticeship*, Springer, Dordecht,.
- Hughes, L.B. & Hughes, L.C. (2013), *VET Learner acquired social capital: resonance with the Australian notion of core skills for work, but much more* – ECER 2013, Istanbul
- Radovan, M. (2010), ‘Adult Learner’s Perceptions of the Learning Environment and its Association with Satisfaction, Confidence and Attitudes towards Learning: An international Comparison’ in *Learning in Transition: Policies and Practices of Lifelong Learning in Post-Socialist Countries* in V. Koslovskiy (et al.), Nauka, St Petersburg
- Raelin, J. (2003), *Creating Leaderful Organizations: How to bring out leadership in everyone*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco
- Svendsen, G.L.H. & Svendsen, G.T. (2004), *The Creation and Destruction of Social Capital: Entrepreneurship, Co-operative Movements and Institutions*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R., Snyder, W. (2002), *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston