

DEFINING WORKPLACE LEARNING

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the significance of workplace learning. Learning is often defined as the route in which any type of knowledge is attained (Eraut, 2000: 4; Lave & Wenger, 1991: 47). The workplace can be an important place for learning and development, and in which knowledge can be created (Avis, 2010: 171). A discussion of the various types of workplace learning is included in this paper, namely those which fall under the category of formal, informal and unconscious. Research shows that 80% of the learning occurs informally through self-directed learning, networking, coaching and mentoring (Yeo, 2008: 318). However, there may be obstacles that can hinder learning at the place of work. Examples of these obstacles are also tackled in this paper.

Keywords: Workplace Learning, Situated Learning, Communities of Practice

Introduction

Working is interconnected with learning and consequently, workplace learning is the way in which skills are upgraded and knowledge is acquired at the place of work. The literature in this paper concerns workplace learning and offers different definitions. Broadly speaking however, it can be defined as the acquisition of knowledge or skills by formal or informal means that occurs in the workplace. According to Collin *et al* (2011) learning in the workplace is perceived as an ever-present practice that occurs through customary work systems (2011: 303).

Workplace learning mostly occurs through work-related interactions, and is generally described as contributing to the learning of both the individual employee and the organisation as a whole (Collin *et al*, 2011: 303; Doornbos *et al*, 2008: 131; Felstead *et al*, 2005: 360, 363; Fenwick, 2008a: 228). Fenwick (2008b) defines workplace learning as occurring through the relations and dynamics between ‘individual actors’ and ‘collectives’ (2008b: 19). Moreover, workplace learning can enhance skills that may lead to

formal qualifications, as well as informal narrowly focused skills (Stroud & Fairbrother, 2006: 458). Research shows that 80% of the work-related learning occurs informally and this includes self-directed learning, networking, coaching and mentoring (Yeo, 2008: 318). Therefore, workplace learning can include formal elements but is predominantly informal in nature, and is often incorporated into workplace social interactions and everyday practices.

According to some authors, workplace learning is also ‘culturally bound’, meaning that the skills that an employee learns represent the requirements of his or her tasks within the organisation (Muhammad & Idris, 2005: 65). Moreover, much evidence shows that people learn more from each other and through finding solutions for their day-to-day problems at the workplace (Felstead *et al*, 2005: 368; Hager & Johnsson, 2009: 497; Silverman, 2003: 15). In this regard, it is often argued that the most important source of information, from which one can learn, is the existing job predecessor. An experienced person is commonly described as the best source of information about a new job wherein he or she can inform about the challenges of and changes required to a task (Silverman, 2003: 14). In addition, workplace learning can be identified as a two-way representation in which employers and employees can mutually address skills development through a process of social discourse in relation to the workplace.

Categories of Workplace Learning that Involve Intervention

Workplace learning is more concerned with informal learning rather than formal education and qualifications. However, methods of workplace learning may take many forms and, according to Silverman (2003), these can be categorised into three types that involve a learning intervention of some sort: in-house training, experience-based learning opportunities and training through coaching and mentoring, and continuous learning (2003: 2).

In-house training involves planned learning activities that take place near the job or outside work. Here, the organisation provides either short training courses at the workplace setting or information and communication proceedings that have a learning element. Trainers are usually from the organisation itself or from external entities.

According to Silverman (2003), experience-based learning is an on-the-job learning activity that is supported and evaluated, mostly through coaching and mentoring (2003: 4). However, Eraut (2000) states that experience-based learning often occurs in an either unplanned or in an unaware manner during the usual day-to-day tasks (2000: 115). In the case of learning that is supported and evaluated, one or more employees are identified as people who trainees and other employees can go to for advice. Experience-based learning may also take the form of job rotation and

increased autonomy. Here an employee is given a somewhat straightforward task and then gradually shifts to more intricate tasks along with the relative responsibility and autonomy.

In their study, Bishop *et al* (2006) hypothesized that the belief that once employees are empowered, they will use that increased autonomy in a responsible way, could be an important part of a learning-supportive culture. Other studies show that lower level employees are often ready for greater autonomy than they usually exercise and are eager to learn how to participate in decision-making related to their tasks (Silverman, 2003: 17). It is often argued that mentoring provides opportunities for peers to help novices become experts (Yeo, 2008: 318). In this regard a skilled employee guides the learner in carrying out particular tasks. Another method would be for a trainee to work beside an experienced employee to observe and learn.

Experience-based learning may also push employees to learn informally through discussions with customers, suppliers and other external stakeholders of the organisation. Eraut (2000) mentions the 'reactive' kind of learning in which learning is explicit but takes place impulsively in response to recent, current or forthcoming situations without any time being specifically reserved for it (2000: 115). This type of learning, which is not supported or evaluated, is a process that occurs normally involuntarily and continuously.

Continuous learning may include a group of employees working together to identify how to improve certain processes, either formally or informally. Accounts such as those above promote the view that continuous learning occurs where the work environment is all the time focused on the learning of new skills and knowledge and largely free of political conflict. In this scenario employees are continuously encouraged and provided with resources to learn for themselves from e.g. books, manuals, videos and computer-based learning. In addition, the study of Fuller & Unwin (2003) on expansive learning illustrates that organisations that offer an open approach to apprenticeship are more expected to form learning opportunities (2003: 412).

Informal/Unconscious Workplace Learning

According to Doornbos *et al* (2008) and Mallon *et al* (2005) workplace learning is predominantly informal or unconscious and is a purely situated, tacit, informal, and social process (2005: 4; 2008: 130). Likewise, Yeo (2008) argues that informal learning is usually unintentional and it may occur with or without the encouragement of the organisation (2008: 318). Doornbos *et al* (2008) further argue that people can learn implicitly and are able to distinguish the changes in their thoughts and behaviours at a later stage (2008: 130).

The notion of ‘*Spontaneous learning*’ is identified by Doornbos *et al* (2008) wherein learning occurs when actions are executed with another objective in mind other than learning (2008: 131). This occurs when the related action is itself unintentional, or when an action is intended but not with the precise objective of learning. Doornbos *et al* (2008) describe the changes in knowledge and skills as a result of such actions as ‘*by-products, discovery, coincidence, or sudden realization*’ (2008: 131). In their study, Rowold & Kauffeld (2009) identified that constant informal learning activities assisted employees most in increasing their relevant work-related competencies (2009: 97). Therefore, the results of their study highlight the significance of informal workplace learning.

Lave & Wenger’s Situated Learning

Maybe the most common theory of the meaning of learning at work stands with Lave & Wenger’s (1991) book on situated learning, which has guided and helped researchers understand the meaning of workplace learning and apprenticeships. In their book, Lave & Wenger emphasise two concepts, namely ‘Communities of Practice’ and ‘Legitimate Peripheral Participation’, wherein they provide insights on the meaning of workplace learning, mostly apprenticeships (Fuller *et al*, 2005). The ‘Communities of Practice’ concept relates to the action of participating in social practices that leads to a sense of belonging within a community (Avis, 2010: 173; Clarke, 2005: 191; Fuller *et al*, 2005: 4; Fuller & Unwin, 2003: 3; Lave & Wenger, 1991: 98; Yeo, 2008: 318). These communities may include some sort of uniformity or diversity in their structure and may also be either organised or made up voluntarily (Chang *et al* 2009: 409).

Employees are able to learn from their participation in the everyday activities of a community (Fenwick, 2008b: 20) and it is argued that communities of practice aid individuals to learn and consequently to perform better at the workplace (Chang *et al*, 2009: 410-11). Several critiques were presented regarding this concept such as the lack of analysis on the politics, comradeship, and form of a community, the lack of attention on the development of the knowledge within the community during periods of change that are expeditive and, the lack of consideration on the innovation offered by the community and the agency/structure actions within (Fenwick, 2008a: 235; Fenwick, 2008b: 21; Fuller *et al*, 2005: 15-16). Therefore, communities of practice are regarded as very important since they create a link between the individual and organisational learning (van Winkelen & McKenzie, 2007: 531). In this regard Newman (1985) suggests that trust and openness should be fostered between the different departments of an organisation (1985: 208). Thus, if an organisation is to succeed, it is important that communities of practice are fostered within, and that these

share the knowledge by allowing these information flows to continue (Coakes & Clarke, 2006: 75).

Obstacles to Workplace Learning

Organisations consist of individual agents of organisational learning, of which behaviour is shaped by the social systems they are embedded in (Easterby-Smith *et al*, 2000: 787). These social systems are also learning systems that can inhibit learning due to the organisational politics, which may result in lack of shared knowledge as illustrated by Newman (1985). According to Collin *et al* (2011) social relations also include power issues to some extent (2011: 303), which are also politically based. In his study, Newman identified “invisible walls” between different units in organisations that hindered the learning and sharing of information (1985: 208).

Collin *et al* (2011) argue that learning processes are central to the use of power and control since workplace learning is seen as linking individual and social realms (2011: 302). As such, learning and power become linked during the tangential doing and shared custom through which workplace culture become mutual, both in isolation and as a group (Collin *et al*, 2011: 303). Organisational politics can impede learning and as such, workplace learning is not a neutral process for the organisation or the worker (Mallon *et al*, 2005: 8).

An example illustrated by Silverman (2003) states that, in organisations, managers are rewarded for the possession of a skill, knowledge and understanding, and not for disseminating these important resources to their subordinates (2003: 16). Therefore, organisational politics may influence how these are accessed and controlled. Undoubtedly, this is not only applicable to managers but also to lower level employees who may feel the need to protect and control their skills due to the status and influence that the same skills give them. Some other forms of barriers for workplace learning, especially informal learning, may include lack of respect from the new employee towards an experienced employee, individuals who hold back information from their colleagues out of fear of being seen as a surplus and passing erroneous information to new employees with the aim of harming them (Billet, 1995: 24-25).

It is interesting to note that Lave & Wenger’s theory does not explore in depth the issue of hindrance and politics and thus, this is a major limitation of their theory in connection with the current research being carried out (Fuller *et al*, 2005: 15). In this regard evidence shows that learning situations may have considerable power inequalities (Collin *et al*, 2011; Malcolm *et al*, 2003: 5). In addition, if employees lack trust in the organisation they work with, they would tend to keep the skills and knowledge acquired to themselves in order to protect their job and position

within the organisation (Ashton & Sung, 2002: 21; Fenwick, 2008a: 233; Kirwan, 2009: 117).

Conclusion

As discussed in the above sections, workplace learning is conventionally seen as a means of improving the skills of employees and enhancing their knowledge, and the learning involved may be either formal or informal. Formal learning, which consists of qualifications and certified training, is no longer seen as the sole method of learning. Formally-acquired qualifications are becoming viewed more in terms of a wider structure that concerns workplaces and the employees, educational institutions and various communities within organisations. At the same time, informal learning at the workplace is becoming an increasingly important tool for training employees. Both formal and informal learning may benefit either the organisation or the individual or both (Crouse *et al*, 2011; Lancaster, 2009). However, such benefits are not automatic. According to Silverman (2003) organisations do not always benefit from workplace learning and the progress features of workplace learning must be taken into consideration that can be hindered by careerism, apprehension, pressure, obsequiousness and unsolved divergences (2003: 15).

Bishop *et al* (2006) state that there are strong indications that cultures put forth a great influence on the amount and kind of learning that takes place (2006: 21). This is especially concerned with assumptions about what comprises „valuable“ knowledge, dealing with the latest knowledge, the appropriate „location“ of knowledge in an organisation or group, and the shape and role of social interactions (Bishop *et al*, 2006: 21). All these appear to have a deep effect on workplace learning. Additionally, in their study, Fuller & Unwin (2003) identified that the expansive or restrictive learning approaches of the organisations they studied are the result of an innate chronological, socio-cultural, organisational and economic practices that are hard to imitate (2003: 424).

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