

RWL 2009

Symposium abstracts

Understanding workplace learning, organisational  
change and the relations between them

## **A high skill society? The landscape of federal employment and training policy in Canada**

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In this paper, we draw on a critical policy analysis (Ball, 1991; Ozga, 2000) of eleven Canadian federal government training and employment policies to reveal three fundamental contradictions in current Federal skill policies in Canada. These contradictions suggest that a highly-skilled knowledge economy, while part of the skills' discourse, is unlikely to become a reality in Canada any time soon.

### **1. High Skills/low skills rhetoric, policy & practice**

Although government reports and rhetoric espouse that building a knowledge economy and innovative society are key goals, we find that training and skills policies tend to be focused on the lower-skilled sector: that is policies are designed for building "essential" skills such as numeracy, literacy, communication and computer competency. Government funds are made available to institutions and agencies for short-term programmes and projects, suggesting there is no intent of transforming the low-skilled worker into a high-skilled one. Our analysis reveals that "high skills" policies, in fact, do not exist, but rather just rhetoric. When 'high skill' is discussed in policies, the intent is on 'importing' high skills through immigration and temporary foreign worker policies. High skills training is expected to be delivered through Canada's university system, not by federal government sponsored programs. The 'high skills/low skills' divide, as described by Brown, Lauder & Green (2000) becomes evident in examining these policies.

### **2. A focus on the excluded?**

The policies we studied are designed to target specific groups (e.g. immigrants, older workers, Aboriginal peoples) with the intent of mitigating social exclusion of marginalised groups. However, a closer look at the policies reveals the most marginalised and excluded from training and employment opportunities are not targeted by these policies. The reality is that the "too hard to help" basket cannot access these programmes even if they really want to. The programmes, structured along policy guidelines, require a minimum level of social and educational capital by participants in order to be accessed. Furthermore, the nature of short-term funding for the programmes only marginally assists those target groups accessing the programmes.

### **3. Passive/active government**

At first glance, the policies give the flavour that the federal government is active in developing a knowledge economy and innovative society. However, within the structures of the Canadian federal state, education and training are devolved to the provincial governments. The result is that a series of fragmented and uncoordinated policies are produced, rather than a holistic framework in which the policies speak to one another with a unified voice.

## **Challenging the 'Skills Crisis': employee engagement in workplace basic skills learning**

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Since the 2001 'Skills for Life' national strategy, the UK government has invested heavily in the development of literacy, numeracy and ESOL amongst adults, providing funding for workplace provision in the form of discrete programmes, literacy embedded in IT courses and in vocational and job-specific training and online learning centres in the workplace. The Leitch Review of Skills (2006) and the subsequent 'Train to Gain' national initiative have restated the importance of providing literacy and numeracy learning in the workplace and have set further targets for improving these skills by 2020. This policy priority has been underpinned by a perceived 'skills crisis' amongst the UK population, originating from the 1997 results of the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The regular employment of such statistics implicitly assumes an "autonomous" (Street 1993) model of skills in which literacy and numeracy are treated as a discrete set of technical skills that individuals either possess or lack and which exists independently from context. Such an approach contrasts with a burgeoning research tradition - labelled the 'New Literacy Studies'- which views literacy in terms of "social practices", highlighting the widely variant use of literacy practices in differing social and institutional contexts and the key role of power relations in shaping and validating such practices. In their review of contemporary Nordic research on workplace learning, Elkjaer et al espouse the importance of taking account of the wider policy context and power relations in shaping, selecting and legitimizing differing versions of workplace learning (Elkjaer et al 2007:37). In our Economic and Social Research Council longitudinal, mixed methods research ('Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning') into the impact of Skills for Life provision on employees and organizations, we have adopted a similar approach in order to assess the impact of 'Skills for Life' strategies in shaping the specific modalities of literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision in the UK. We argue that policy imperatives underpinning Skills for Life national strategy, which have sought to highlight a 'skills crisis' based on narrowly circumscribed perceptions of literacy and numeracy have led to insufficient recognition of the complex constitution of employee skills and competencies in differing organizational contexts as well as the significance of learning outside formal educational channels. In keeping with this approach, we define 'workplace learning' as "that learning which derives its purpose from the context of employment... learning in, through and for the workplace" (Evans et al 2006:9). Elkjaer, B., Høytrup, S and K.L. Pedersen (2007) in *Competence Development as Workplace Learning* Innsbruck University Press; Evans, K., Hodkinson, P., Rainbird, H., Unwin, L.(2006) *Improving Workplace Learning* London: Routledge; Street, B.V.(1993 ed.) *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*. Cambridge:CUP

## Competence-bearing relations and organisational learning

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Work tasks, problems and situations afford ongoing opportunities for learning and the construction of knowledge. With the arrival of the so called learning economy competence and organisational learning are regarded as issues of company survival. However, recent reports bring to the fore that e.g. too high a level of work intensity has a negative impact on the results achieved by the organisation, and entails costs due to a loss of know-how and knowledge (Docherty, Kira & Shani, 2008).

This paper is located within the field of organisation pedagogics, which originates from a 30-year tradition at Stockholm University, Sweden. The aim is to discuss two related concepts, relational and competence-bearing relation (Author, 2007), and to connect them to prerequisites for competence in organisations. This entails dealing with the potential of organising work for learning and derives its origin from combining theorising and empirical studies in the light of the contemporary working life context. Thus, the paper is an attempt to theorise and conceptualise workplace learning in a way that seeks to establish the link between individual learning processes and organisational learning.

In a conceptual sense competence is always related to a task or a problem, and, as a consequence, also related to the apprehension and understanding of this task (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). This understanding is partly individual but also existing in the interactions of the workplace, interactions that take place and are integrated in the carrying out of work tasks. Over time such interactions develop into relations which can be described as bearers of competence. This competence is of value to the operational core task of the organisation, and is built up both in adaptive and developmental learning (Ellström, 2001). Moving to the organisational level these interactions and accompanying relations constitute a dynamic structure, a so called relational. This reasoning and the conclusions are part of an ongoing construction process emphasising experiential learning processes through which people construct meaning together not just from their experiences but in their experiences, while in the course of carrying out work tasks and seeing each others in action. And, perhaps there is room and use for concepts with this aspiration?

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## **Conceptions of knowledge and development – possibilities of organisational learning in manufacturing companies**

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The importance of knowledge and learning in work has grown in manufacturing industry as well as in other industries. The requirement to act in customer-oriented and flexible ways presupposes that knowledge related to products and production process is shared across functions and that new kinds of practices are developed for cross-functional collaboration. This means that manufacturing companies need to promote organisational learning.

This study explores conceptions of knowledge and development and their relations to organisational learning in manufacturing industry. The data was produced in workshops and meetings arranged in four manufacturing companies of different industrial sectors. The aim of the workshops was to consider developmental challenges of the organisations. The workshops invited representatives of the production process to discuss together about knowledge and practices of knowledge sharing by applying dialogical methods. The workshop participants also talked about what could be learned from their experiences and how these practices could be developed.

The findings of the study propose that the prevailing conceptions of knowledge and development support practices of knowledge sharing and organising work that limit organisational learning in the case companies. The dominating conceptions, logic of performance and propositional knowledge (Ellström 2005, Göranzon et al. 2005), emphasise systematisation of work processes and the use information systems, while ignoring interaction with colleagues and improvisation inherent in daily work. At the same time, continuous changes in everyday work and need for cross-functional collaboration call for the collective development of work practices and forms of participation. This suggests that the companies should also embrace the logic of development (Ellström 2005) by supporting collective reflection (Boud et al. 2006) and by engaging all employees in the construction of new ways of working. Different conceptions of knowledge and development coexist in the companies, but formal practices reflect only a limited understanding of knowledge and organisational learning. Therefore, manufacturing companies need to build more encompassing conceptions of knowledge and development and new forums for participation.

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## **Integrating formal and informal learning - a resituative learning approach**

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Research at European level shows that European enterprises actively combine formal and informal learning. The ways this takes place at organization level seems to depend on specific features of the organizational context of each individual organizations. The integration of formal and informal learning is here analyzed on the basis of Young's connective model with its "import"-perspective and Archer's concept of "emergence". Via processes of emergence external knowledge is assumed to be integrated in the employees' existing performative knowledge through the process of informal learning via practice and processes of interaction. A small IT firm is used as case-study. The analysis of the organization context, the work tasks, and the use of formal and informal learning indicate that the learning through permanent upgrading and the resituative processes at work take place at the individual level but the collective nature of the learning interferes with the structural dimension characteristic of organizational learning. The learning mode is found to be developmental and the learning strategy is integrated; the formal learning is planned to support the informal learning of the employees at work. This strategy is based on the implicit recognition that the knowledge needed in the organization context to create change does not always arise from the practice context itself as maintained in postmodernist theories. The integration of the formal and informal resituative learning takes place in and through the discursive particularization of meaning in the organization's competency groups. Among two other interacting generative mechanisms the discursive particularization of meaning therefore can be conceptualised as a generative mechanism in making the new, general knowledge more applicable and efficacious in relation to the specific practice context in both restrictive and developmental manners, thus stimulating and "triggering" the informal resituating learning in a learning environment that appears to be of a developmental kind. The domination of two developmental modes of learning with corresponding levels of action regulation the institutionalized activity logic and competence framework is developmental.

## **Inter-professionals operating in the 'space of reasons': thinking, communicating and acting (implications for workplace learning and organisational change)**

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The profile of the forms of learning that are most directly associated with analysing the relation between learning and work – professional, vocational, workplace and organisational – tends to fall in the main on: (i) fairly well-bounded work contexts, even though they may be in state of perpetual change; (ii) intra-vocational or professional activity; and (iii) processes of learning and environments and incentives for intra-vocational or professional learning in such contexts. Little research has been undertaken, however, on inter-professional activity and learning, notable exceptions being Engestrom (2008) and Edwards et al. (2008). The focus of this paper is, however, rather different from their the research interventions to transform practice. Substantively, it focuses on the forms of inter-professional activity and learning that occur as part of everyday work. Conceptually, it uses the significant parallel that exists between the philosophical framework that informs Vygotsky's ideas about concept formation and McDowell and Brandom's ideas about the role of reason in facilitating human understanding and action, to provide a conceptual framework to analyse inter-professional learning. The paper does so by discussing a case study of inter-professional learning and identifying the implications of its analysis for the fields of workplace learning and organisational change.

## **Learning Networks as a Vehicle for Change - How to Foster the Social Effectiveness of Investments Made in Workplace Innovation?**

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The role of intangible capital as a factor for labour productivity growth is increasing in importance. According to recent economic analyses carried out firstly in the US and later in Finland, among others, changes in organizational structures have had a significant effect on labour productivity growth in both countries in the 1990s and 2000s. Annual investments made in organizational innovation are estimated in these analyses as 20% of the cost of persons employed in executive occupations added to revenues from the managerial consulting services industry. In countries such as Finland where organizational change is not a managerial prerogative to the same extent than in the US and where employee participation in the event of changes is a common practice, these calculations probably underestimate the investments made in organizational change and development and their effect on productivity growth.

An important assumption in the above economic analyses on the role of intangible capital is that employer-paid training and investments made in organizational innovation have greater spill-over effects than technological investments. This argument stems from a view that investments made in training and organization are bound to people and, hence, easier to transfer from one company to another through labour turnover. The spread of organizational innovations, however, is not a straightforward process as proposed by standard economic analyses, owing to the context-bound nature of workplace practices. In our view, the main policy area for the promotion of the spread of organizational or other workplace innovation is not be found in improved dynamics of the labour market, but in building spaces for dialogue and learning between companies.

Our paper examines the experiences achieved so far in boosting mutual exchange of information, cooperation and joint development between companies in learning network projects funded by the Finnish Workplace Development Programme TYKES between 2004 and 2009. The paper compares three types of project – user-oriented projects, method-based projects and learning network projects – in producing outcomes of four levels by means of a conceptual framework developed for examining the learning dynamics of development programmes. Of the four levels of outcomes, we focus on generative outcomes, i.e. results that benefit other parties besides those directly involved in the project. The potential of learning network projects to bring about generative outcomes are examined both conceptually and in light of the experiences achieved of the 17 learning network projects funded by the programme. We illustrate the core process of learning networks, i.e. interactive forums in which the experiences gained in micro-level development work by the various actors are brought to common discussions with a view to generating new development measures, through two case studies of the TYKES learning network projects.

## **Learning to work no longer: an exploration of the process of “retirement” from the workplace**

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This paper explores the learning that takes place at, through and for retirement from the workplace.

“Retirement” in itself is not straightforward either as a concept or a process. There is a common assumption in the Western World that people remain in the workplace earning money to a certain age, then stop or retire. However retirement rarely takes the form of a single significant event in a person’s life. It can even be unclear whether a person counts as retired or not (Weiss 2005). Retirement can be understood instead as an ongoing process which can last for a number of years.

This is demonstrated in data from the “Learning Lives” research project. The life histories and ongoing lives of over 100 adults were researched in a series of interviews over 4 years. The sample included people over 50, and approaching retirement or retired. The focus was the interrelationships between learning, agency and identity. Analysis of this bank of qualitative data has provided a great deal of insight into the retirement process, and into the identity changes and learning that are integral to it.

The focus in this paper is learning - as part of the changes taking place in people’s lives. It is central to the lengthy periods of transition or transformation that many older people go through. It is often informal, for example as people tacitly adapt to new circumstances. It may involve anticipation of change, preparation for change and reactions to change. In some cases it may include formal course attendance either as deliberate preparation or because new circumstances provide the opportunity for this type of learning.

The learning can be seen as interrelating in complex ways with people’s positions, identities and agency. Learning is positioned within social structures. It is positioned in time and place, and it is positioned within the more detailed learning cultures through which people learn eg family, local community, leisure & work. During retirement some people’s identities undergo significant change, while others seek to protect an identity which has been important to them for many years. Going to work and earning money, and in some cases having a particular occupation is an important part of their being, and finding a replacement for it is tacitly or consciously important. (Ford 2005). Learning is influenced by and in turn influences positions and identities and the actions that people choose to take in their new circumstances. The paper will explore these interrelationships using contrasting examples from “Learning Lives. These case studies show in different ways that retirement is a process and that learning is an integral part of that “becoming” (Hodkinson et al 2008).

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## **On practices that persist and perpetuate: Learning work in an Australian utility company**

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Schatzki (2005, 2006) conceptualizes organisations as 'bundles of practices and material arrangements' that are enacted through practitioner understandings of work, a conceptualization we have been employing in a current research project that explores learning in particular kinds of organisational practices. Schatzki (2006) further characterizes organizations 'as they happen' as performances of practices that persist through practice memory (a persistence of structure from the past to the present) and perpetuate through unfolding events that are teleologically oriented toward the future.

This paper unpacks Schatzkian concepts of what constitutes a practice, and how practices can persist and perpetuate, yet still support notions of ongoing change and learning at work. We align these practice concepts with organisational change literature (e.g. Tsoukas & Chia 2002) that challenge notions of organisational change as being made up of episodic and / or linear progression. We apply these concepts empirically through discussion of a qualitative case study of an Australian utility company. In this research, we have been investigating work practices that have been designed to enhance organizational effectiveness, yet can be seen to effect learning.

One example of such organisational practices in this utility company are safety practices. In our data collection, we used multiple qualitative research methods including 1) site observations of practice activity and the material, spatial work contexts within which safety practice occurs, 2) semi-structured interviews to elicit enactments of practice, and 3) review of other material arrangements such as safety forms and safety indicators. Our findings demonstrate how enacted organisational safety practices integrate persistence of past practices that produce good safety standards, whether developed from histories of enactments inside the organization or brought in by practitioners with histories of enactments from other organizations. At the same time these practices also perpetuate in local, situated and unanticipated ways through interactional understandings and discourses that emerge about what it means to be a safe worker. Such discourses support inferential understandings about what it means to be safely working together for the future. The learning that arises from practice work characterized in these ways goes beyond the specifics of safety compliance or material adherence to safety standards. Our testing of these Schatzkian concepts through this case study suggests useful conceptual contributions to workplace learning through a 'practice turn' orientation to organisational studies.

## **Persons in the shadow: Assessing the work context of expertise in the domain of jazz music**

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Over the recent years, workplace learning has concentrated on how 'affordances', 'environments' and 'tacit' knowledge facilitate the development of expertise as well as organisational learning and development. This paper introduces a new focus conceptually and empirically. In the case of the former we focus on work/learning settings rather than workplaces. In the case of the latter, we focus on a hitherto rarely researched practice – jazz music. Furthermore, in contradistinction to the idea that expert performance in the domain of music and jazz is widely attributed to huge amounts of individual deliberate practice over the career, the paper argues that the development of expertise crucially depends on social factors such as the presence of "persons in the shadow", such as teachers, mentors or more experienced colleagues, of distributed expert communities, design practice patterns, direct aspirants' practice by deciding which styles and topics are to be practiced, and motivate them to develop - often extrinsically. The paper sheds light on how such activity assists jazz guitarists achieve a high level of skill, become a part of established expert networks and thus get calls for gigs by renowned musicians and become known to the jazz society. Thus we argue that our concept of persons in the shadow reveals those hidden aspects of learning that develop expertise and assist venues (i.e. workplaces) to offer change by offering a higher-standard of performance to audiences.

## **Practice-Based Innovations: A Learning Perspective**

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The concept of innovation is often linked to factors such as the competitiveness of companies and economic growth. In addition, there is often a strong focus on technical and scientific advances that lead to the development of "spearhead technologies". This paper is based on the assumption that there is a need to broaden this view of innovations to include also innovations with a focus on public sector organizations, working conditions and other issues relating to working life. In line with this, the paper has a focus on the workplace as a system not only for production, but also for learning and practice-based innovations.

The more specific aim of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework that can be used to analyse practice-based innovation processes. The concept of practice-based innovation is defined here as the employees' and/or the managements' renewal of their own operations in some respect – for example by the development and introduction of new working methods, routines or services – where this renewal is based on experiences, knowledge and competencies acquired in work processes within the operations concerned. This definition focuses on workplace learning as a fundamental mechanism behind innovation processes of this type, and, thereby, on the learning environment of the workplace and to what extent it enables or constrains innovative learning (Ellström, 2006; Engeström, 1999).

The proposed conceptual framework is built around a distinction between two interrelated dimensions of a work process: the explicit and the implicit dimension. As the term work process is defined here it is close to the term routine as developed in research on organisational learning and innovations (e.g. Feldman & Pentland, 2003). It is assumed that practice-based innovations are formed in the interplay and tensions between the explicit and implicit dimensions of work through processes of reproductive and developmental learning.

The proposed framework is applied to an analysis of a case study of innovative work practices within a team of care-workers in elderly care. To conclude, some implications of the proposed framework are discussed in relation to the interplay between individual and organisational learning as well as the distinction between planned and ongoing organizational change.

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## **Re-thinking the 'thing': Comparing sociomaterial approaches to understanding and researching learning in work**

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In re-thinking workplace learning, a prominent shift has occurred that invites more exploration. This shift challenges the social/cultural and the personal as the sole defining parameters of what it means to learn and focuses more on the sociomaterial. Given the entanglement of work life with material practice, technologies, vehicles, architectures, nature and objects of all kinds, sociomaterial perspectives of learning would appear to be very useful. They also unsettle unhelpful categories which have traditionally separated 'individual' and 'organizational' learning. Sociomaterial perspectives assume activity to be non-linear and unpredictable, knowledge to be undecidable, relations (social as well as material) to be unruly, and ontologies to be inherently messy. However, while a range of conceptual and methodological framings employing material semiotics have commanded recent attention in the social sciences, this range is less evident in studies of workplace learning. Apart from the relative prominence in work-learning studies of cultural-historical activity theory or CHAT (e.g, Engestrom; Sawchuk; Unwin/Fuller) and a few excellent if under-cited analysts using actor-network theory (ANT) (e.g. Nicoll/Edwards; Fox; Mulcahy), there does not yet exist a vibrant conversation about and among sociomaterial conceptions.

The purpose of this paper is to open a dialogue that compares theoretical conceptions that reclaim and re-think material practice – 'the thing' in the social and personal mix – specifically in terms of work activity and what is construed to be learning in that activity. Three perspectives have been selected for comparison: CHAT, ANT, and complexity theory. The three are similar in their conceptualization of knowledge and capabilities as emerging - simultaneously with identities, policies, practices and environment - in webs of interconnections between heterogeneous things, human and nonhuman. Yet each perspective is itself a slippery, heterogeneous and contested site of inquiry. ANT, for example, represents diffuse sensibilities that have evolved into post-cybernetic and post-feminist conceptions of fluid geographies which eschew many of its original tenets. Each illuminates different facets of the sociomaterial in work-learning that can afford important understandings: about how subjectivities are produced in work, how knowledge circulates and sediments into formations of power, and how practices are configured and re-configured, Each also signals, in different ways, what generative possibilities may exist for counter-configurations and alternate identities in spaces and places of work.

The paper will compare these three conceptual framings, in context of their uptake in learning research, to explore their diverse contributions and limitations on questions of agency, power, difference, and the presence of the 'thing'. The conclusion suggests their implications for opening new questions and methods for inquiry in workplace learning.

## **The Leader as a Facilitator of Learning at Work**

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The aim of this paper is to present findings from a study concerning leadership in relation to co-workers' learning and development at the workplace. More specifically, the focus is on leaders' notions of learning-oriented leadership, and their actions in daily work. Theoretically, the paper is structured around three leadership research traditions; studies of effective leadership (Bass & Reggio, 2005), studies of managerial work (Hales, 2005) and critical management studies (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In addition, these leadership traditions are also linked with theories concerning workplace learning (Ellström, 2006). The empirical basis of the paper comprises case studies of two industrial firms. The data have been collected in semi-structured interviews with leaders (n=30). The methodology can be characterized as interactive (Aagard Nielsen & Svensson, 2006), in the sense that there has been a close collaboration between researchers and practitioners in the two case organizations. The results indicate that the leaders view learning and the development of their co-workers as important issues. Based on the degree of formalization the leaders' activities to facilitate learning can be characterized as planned, partially planned and spontaneous. When working with the co-workers' learning the leaders alternate between acting as supporters, educators and confronters. Furthermore, learning-oriented leadership is influenced by factors such as the co-workers' attitudes and motivation, the presence of learning issues on the organizational agenda and the design of the production systems. To conclude, the leaders in both companies can be seen as facilitators of learning. However, their leadership is mainly performance-oriented and focused on adaptive learning. There are traces of development-oriented leadership as well, but these patterns are not as apparent. For instance, the facilitation of critical reflection associated with developmental learning is not common for the leaders in either of the firms.

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## **Understanding the Learning- and Socialisation Processes Initiated by Academics in Retail Banking**

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This study was conducted to answer the question: Do academics create organisational learning in retail banking? In order to answer this question I initially investigated what kind of learning- and socialisation processes are initiated when academic educated personnel are hired as bank clerks in retail banking who traditionally use apprentices and whether these processes are hindrances or facilitators of organisational learning.

The financial sector has traditionally educated their staff in-house instead of using the public education system. One consequence of this is that the sector prefers to recruit bank clerks and rarely recruits academics that have completed a post-graduate study at a university. This has the serious draw back that they prevent the potential innovation that might result from recruiting people educated in other traditions. My approach is based on situated learning in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 2003) and the object of analysis is the way academics fight their battle of legitimacy and symbolic power (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002) to acquire the symbolic, embodied and encultured knowledge (Collins, 1995; Tsoukas, 2006).

A descriptive case study was conducted using observations, semi-structured interviews with groups and individuals. In order to analyse the learning and socialisation processes the traditional semi-structured interviews was supplemented with more creative and aesthetic interview approaches. The approaches include interviews based on photography (Petersen & Østergaard, 2004), interviews based on drawing (Vince & Broussine, 1996) and interviews based on 'the double' (Gherardi, 1995). First traditional interviews were conducted, but the data failed to answer the questions about learning processes, and so the three approaches were applied to generate three different kinds of data. Observations were used in order to understand how the academics influence the community of practice, and not just through the explicit spoken language, but also through the tacit embodied and encultural knowledge.

In short, the results from the study demonstrate how the learning- and socialisation processes in some cases are hindered by two different modes of learning; the scholastic and the apprenticeship. Learning- and socialisation processes have also been shown to be impeded by power, because the academics challenge the power balance but lack the unique language spoken in a bank. Finally, I found that participation in work processes in itself does not ensure learning; any learning outcome depends on which work processes the particular department defines as important.

## **When is it OK to learn at work? The learning work of organisational practices**

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The use of learning is ubiquitous in organisations, but this term is used in very different ways. Our previous work has identified tensions between an organisational desire for learning to be commonplace and an unwillingness of some workers to be identified as learners. This paper draws on a subsequent Australian Research Council project (2007-09) that focuses on what we have termed 'integrated development practices'. These are common organisational practices that both enhance organisational effectiveness and contribute to organisational and employee learning. Importantly, such practices are independent of formal education and training programs and are managed by people whose primary job function is not training or learning development.

The rationale for the study is in the growing interest in the relationship between work and learning in Australian workplaces. This is seen in the uptake of learning in management discourses and practices and in emerging conceptualisations of learning. A consequence of these discourses and conceptualisations is a conflation of work practices and learning where all work is understood to be learning and therefore all workers are learners. This contradicts more traditional beliefs that learning is situated in education and training programs. This shift opens up organisational practices as a site for understanding learning at work.

These organisational practices are being investigated in terms of how they create affordances that enable individual and organisational change. The purpose of the study is to provide qualitative analyses of organisational practices where learning occurs and how these are experienced by workers and organisations.

To date we have collected data from three workplaces, where we conducted interviews, facilitated focus groups, carried out observations and analysed organisational documents. Examples of integrated development practices that we have explored include performance appraisal, team-work, acting in higher positions and project work. We have mapped these practices in terms of the complex and different ways in which they get taken up both within and across organisations.

This paper analyses the ways in which learning and being a learner was talked about within the integrated development practices across all three organisations, and how this discourse was seen as legitimate. We contrast these findings with those of the earlier project on informal learning at work that suggested that learning and the identity of being a learner were strongly resisted in the everyday culture of working relationships.

Using the theorisations of practice of Schatzki (2006, 2006) and Kemmis (2007) we discuss the implications of these different findings to examine what makes it okay to be learning at work and to explore the affordances created by different organisational contexts and how they act to legitimise or undermine particular practices that involve learning.

## **Why do employers train their workers? Evidence from Australia**

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Despite the ongoing research carried out into employer training in Australia and overseas (Cully, 2006) and the availability of statistical evidence on training investments by Australian employers (NCVER, 2006), the operation of training activities within organisations remains something of a 'black box' for research and policy makers. This is particularly the case for understanding the reasons why employers provide training and their choices about the type of training they provide. Recent work by the Australian Industry Group (Allen Consulting Group, 2006) and the Business Council of Australia (2006) has underlined the increasingly strategic nature of training in modern Australian organisations. These reports highlight the importance of the current skills shortages arising from full-employment in driving training activities in organisations. Here organisations are beginning to realise that their future access to the skills they have identified as necessary for future growth cannot be guaranteed by the outputs of the national vocational education and training (VET) system and they need to increase their own training efforts in-house to ensure the supply of skills. In other words, skills have become a major driver for employer training. Research overseas has highlighted the prominence of training in the development of new approaches to human resource management and high performance work systems (Butler et al, 2004). Here training is important because it enables employers to implement new systems of work organisation that will radically improve business performance. Cappelli (2004) has argued that training plays a key role in building the close human relationships required for high performance work systems often referred to as "social capital". This paper presents an analysis of the 2005 Survey of Employer Use and Views of the VET system to uncover the reasons why employers provide training in different circumstances and how different organisational characteristics will predispose employers towards discrete training choices.

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## **"Save the Customer!" - Seizing workplace learning affordances in a sales-oriented customer centre. A concept of learning as the unfolding of individual agency in the workplace.**

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Call centres have become a major channel for sales and customer service being increasingly valued as a means of achieving business goals. Work in call centres is often presented as a form of unskilled labour characterized by routinization, scripts, technological control and intensive performance targets displayed against continual organizational changes. Managing for efficiency and control plays a key role in achieving business objectives, yet at the risk of counterproductive outcomes with regard to employee well-being and the quality of the customer interaction. Based on evidence from ethnographic field data from one call centre for sales and customer support, I draw attention to ways of manifesting individual agency as a means of transcending the structuring influence of technology. Noticeably, such manifestation taps into the area of workplace learning based on active participation in workplace activities.

The case illustrates a happy story of how an employee learning initiative finds its way in a high-pressure workplace. Yet, to which extent does this qualify this particular workplace as a learning environment? Are there established procedures to offer encouragement and support or is workplace learning a matter of serendipitous circumstances for unfolding agency?

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