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Choy, Sarojni C. (2009) *Optimising learning in the workplace*. Quest (Canberra City)(2).

There are three bodies of research that suggest ways in which learning in the workplace can be optimised. The first is evident in the emergent literature endorsing the need to include workplace pedagogies as useful epistemological tools for learners. It is now widely recognised that the workplace provides various pedagogies that facilitate and support learning. Key dimensions of workplace pedagogies and their efficacies are well explained by Billett (2002, 2004, 2008). He lists the key dimensions as: daily work practices; coaching; other workers; questioning; observing and listening; modelling; and workplace document procedures. While these offer a range of learning opportunities, each has strengths in supporting particular types of learning outcomes. Therefore, it is important to design formal learning activities in ways that can help learners engage appropriate pedagogical dimensions to optimise different types of learning outcomes. However there is a limited Australian research on learners' understanding of workplace pedagogies and their utility.

The second relates to research by Entwistle & Peterson (2004), Boulton-Lewis, Marton, Lewis and Wilss (2000), and others showing that learners' conceptions of knowledge and learning along with learning orientations influence the strategies they use and the quality of outcomes they achieve. Their conceptions affect the cognitive processing strategies. This implies that a comprehensive conceptual knowledge and understanding of workplace pedagogies would enhance their learning. Nevertheless, little is known about how students on workplacement and even the workers who need to continue learning in the workplace actually conceptualise the various workplace pedagogical dimensions.

The third area of research argues for a distinct set of skills for learning in the workplace that supplement academic learning skills. This is because the process and management of learning in the workplace is a lot more salient and the goals are more immediate and obvious. Candy and Crebert (1991) explain that academic learning generally involves propositional knowledge, is decontextualised, encourages eloquent solutions, and tends to be individualistic and competitive. Workplace learning on the other hand generally involves procedural knowledge, is contextualised by the nature of the organisation, deals with real pragmatic problems, and often depends on collaborative teamwork. Academic skills generally include:

- Learning from instruction (listening, taking notes, summarising, questioning);
- Performing assigned learning tasks (understanding the purpose of a task, following instructions, anticipating the kinds of responses required);
- Relating practical experiences to the material being taught and applying the principles derived from theory and research;
- Basic learning skills such as finding information, organising and categorising thoughts, reviewing material for examinations, developing exam techniques; and
- Learning how to generalise and when to generalise (Tennant, 2000, p. 126-127).

Arguing that academic learning skills are less applicable to learning in the workplace, Tennant (2000) goes on to list a set of distinct skills for learning in the workplace:

- Analyzing work experiences
- Learning from others
- Functioning with incomplete information
- Contemplating multiple courses of action to decide on the most appropriate action at a given moment

- Learning about organizational cultures and sub-cultures
- Expanding learning opportunities by using a range of resources and activities and
- Understanding various competing interests in the profession.

These skills serve well the acquisition of competence to meet the specific needs of particular worksites (situational performance) as well as the wide-ranging needs of similar occupations.

Based on the summary above, three ways to strengthen learner agency to optimise learning in the workplace can be illustrated as follows:
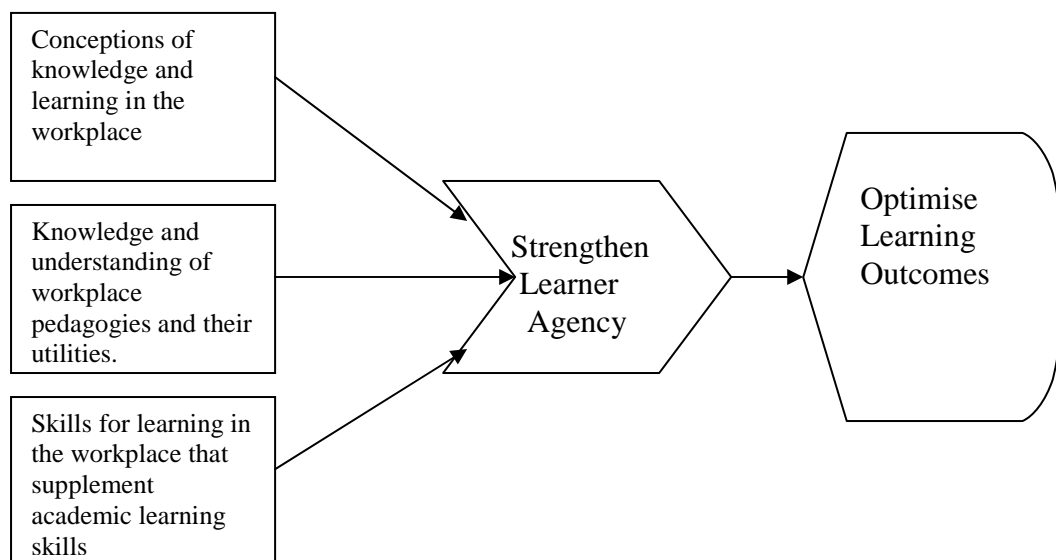
Australian research in these three areas is sparse. A pilot study on these is currently being conducted to find out how best to prepare students before, during and after workplacement in order to optimise learning in the workplace. For further information contact Dr Sarojni Choy by email: s.choy@qut.edu.au.

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