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Professional learning and development for older workers – a study of one UK higher education institution

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Introduction

Extended working lives will affect us all. The lifting of the default retirement age (DFA) in the UK, rising life expectancy and increasing numbers of older workers (ONS 2013), spotlights the place of older workers, their engagement and professional learning needs.

This empirical research aims to answer the value of professional development and learning to older workers and to management in the higher education workplace. It explores understandings of older workers in professional roles in a higher education institution, their perspectives of professional development and learning, together with those of management. This research concerns professional learning at a micro-organizational level to inform at a macro-organizational level in an adult workplace setting. The research is located within adult professional development and learning literature but is also connected to related workplace learning theories.

The research focus is on understanding what older workers and management see as valuable professional development and learning in a higher education (HE) case study in England. Pragmatic in approach, it emphasises high performance. It considers older workers wish to do their best in their work and management want the best from their workers. The research questions consider:

- What professional development do older workers see as valuable in the HE case study?
- What professional development does management see as valuable for older workers in the HE case study?
- How might any differing views on what professional development should be offered, be reconciled?

Defining older workers

The notion of an older worker is problematic as is the notion of an older adult (Findsen 2015). Age is used to define government policy around pension awards and benefits. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) in the UK classes an older worker as being 50+ (2013), but there are significant country to country differences. Older workers learning and development aspirations are subject to a triple interaction of employer, worker and government policy intersected by cultural, political and economic considerations which may enhance or impede their chances (Findsen 2015).

Defining professional development and learning

There is no agreed definition of professional development (PD) and what is interchangeably referred to as 'continuing professional development' (CPD). Professional development has multiple meanings and dimensions (Friedman et al. 2001). CIPD defines CPD as 'a combination of approaches, ideas and techniques to manage learning and growth'. The focus is firmly on results – the benefits professional development can bring to you in the real world, to demonstrate skills efficiency within a performative setting. CPD describes learning activities undertaken throughout working life and intended to enhance individual and organizational performance in university professional and managerial spheres (Mitchell and Thomas cited in Woodward 1996, 1), bringing in the role of employers and professional associations. More recently, there has been a move away from PD to a broader term of professional learning (Timperley 2011). Although both are intentional, ongoing and systematic processes (Guskey 2000), professional learning is 'hampered by connotations of delivery of information'. Learning recognises 'the internal process in which individuals create professional knowledge, through interaction, to create new meanings' (Timperley 2011).

There is no one theory of adult learning or one model to explain how adults learn, where learning takes place or the process of learning (Merriam 2001). Influenced by Carl Rogers, Knowles' (1975) five assumptions of adult learning in a theory of andragogy, based on a humanistic viewpoint, proposed adults are self directing, independent. Drivers for learning are intrinsically motivated, not extrinsic; attitudes to learning are valued when integrated with everyday life; and experience is a rich resource for learning.

Knowles' theory for how adults learn and their attitude towards it, proposes learners should be involved in their own learning and in creating a climate in which they could best learn. Self-directed learning, is a process whereby individuals take control of their own learning, identify their own learning needs, formulating their goals. Adults can and should be allowed to participate in evaluating their learning needs, planning and implementing learning activities, and evaluating those experiences (Merriam, 2001). Furthermore individuals can be supported to further self-direction in being given experiences, appropriate learning tools, resources and encouragement.

However, Knowles' theories give little recognition to individuals shaped by the culture and society they inhabit, and that external structures and social institutions define that learning, in a way that the learner has little control over. In leaving out 'the organizational and social impediments to adult learning: he never painted the big picture. He chose the mechanistic over the meaningful' (Grace, 1996, 386 cited in Merriam 2001). There is thus a strong relation between the adult professional literature to that of workplace learning literature.

Relating older adult professional learning to the workplace learning literature

Recognising the significance of organisational and social impediments to understanding how older workers learn in the workplace, and professional learning grounded within socio cultural literature of workplace learning, there is a valid claim for workplace learning to be considered alongside professional learning, in being fundamental to uncovering what is critical to older workers' professional development and learning in sites of work which may potentially be subject to impediments of exclusion and discrimination. Hager (cited in Malloch et al., 2011) pointing to

underestimations of the role of social, cultural and organisational factors in workplace learning, sees them as providing a platform for re-thinking the nature of continuing professional learning to better reflect how learning takes place in the workplace. Socio-cultural paradigm perspectives on learning are posited on the view that adult development cannot be understood apart from the context in which it occurs and that it is an intersection of factors which affect adult learning and development significant for this study (Baumgartner, 2001).

Arguing against learning as only a formal process occurring in explicitly educational settings like schools, Billett proposes a workplace as a learning environment focusing on the interaction between 'the affordances and constraints of the social setting', on the one hand, and the agency and biography of the individual participant, on the other, which strengthens what he calls 'relational inter-dependencies', between individual and social agency, between the engagement of the worker, and 'affordances' of the work environment (Billett, 2001, 2004, 2008a, 2008b; Billett and Somerville, 2004 in Malloch et al., 2011). Complex negotiations take place between imposed expectation and norms by organisations to further their continuity and survival, set against learners own preferences and goals, which are 'essentially as a question of the learner's participation in situated work activities'(ibid).

Narrow views of learning in the workplace have focussed on skills and knowledge acquisition and are part of a contested dualistic debate around models of acquisition against models of participation and related concepts of cognition versus models recognising socio-cultural situativity (Malloch et al., 2011), such as Lave and Wenger' situated learning (1991), where learning is socially located in communities of practice drawing attention to types of learning in the workplace. Research shows that the recognition of informal learning, such as tacit knowledge, is important in workplace learning.

Evans (cited in Malloch et al., 2011,160) argues for wider notions of work based learning (WBL) proposing a supplement to more demand-led training and skills to the establishment of quality relationships facilitated by dialogue. Such learning could be found in communities of practice and through coaching and mentoring models. The role of tacit knowledge as informal knowledge, being 'we can know more than we can tell' (Polyani 1967), is not always recognised or valued or utilised in the workplace (Smith, 2001). Recognition of tacit skills, defined as 'implicit or hidden dimensions of knowledge' key elements of mastery workers draw on in every day practice, such as interpersonal abilities; reflective abilities; prioritising and planning could be beneficial (Evans, Kersh and Kontiainen, 2004) in sustaining learning in adults, with research indicating that if such tacit skills were recognised, older workers would remain engaged in the workplace where otherwise the reverse might do the opposite. As much as 90% of knowledge in an organisation is embedded in people's heads (Smith 2001). Furthermore, the comparing and making of binaries, such as tacit versus implicit, informal versus formal is considered unhelpful in the workplace (Malloch et al., 2011).

Tikkanen and Nyhan (2008) call for a new mindset on the interrelationship between work, learning and ageing. In particular, for an older worker being offered opportunities and support to participate in organised learning, which leads to a feeling of being valued, appreciated and needed.

Whether older workers should be differentiated in terms of their learning and development has been debated, particularly as there is a widely-held view, that late career workers do not invest heavily in their own careers. However, evidence found that contrary to this pre-conception, age was not a factor in the hours spent on professional development and business networking (Greller 2006); of particular relevance due to the concern of underemployment for this sector. A growing proportion of workers between ages 50-70 reports being very overqualified for their jobs McNair (2011); a significant waste of talent even though some workers choose to move to less stressful roles. Such concerns raise the issue of being able to flourish in the workplace in later career.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual and theoretical framework focuses on socio-cultural processes and relationships. Sen and Nussbaum's (1993) capability theory and the notion of flourishing through opportunities for professional development is central to the conceptual framework, which is context led. The emphasis on participation and access to participation, professional development and learning is seen through Sen and Nussbaum's lens of human flourishing (ibid). High performance means staff and management come together in relational and dialectic space, where respect for older workers' contribution is not always seen as valuable. Central is the Habermasian (1987) perspective of the necessity of provision of relational and dialogic spaces to achieve mutual understanding, through supporting older workers to be agentic; that is able to contribute as well as receive. The model provides a rationale for older workers playing a continued and valuable role in the workplace. Habermas' (1990) thinking on dialogic spaces is helpful in seeing older workers as agentic, both able to contribute as well as to receive.

Summary

Exploring the connection between adult professional development and learning to workplace learning supports understanding the development and learning of older workers, to allow flourishing and realising capabilities in later life workplace learning. Also important are the types of learning recognised as valuable.

Methodology An interpretative, qualitative, case study methodology, using a multi-strategy approach of survey (Phase 1) and structured interviews (Phase 2) with staff and management was conducted. For Phase 1, the survey elicited 28 responses from those self reporting as over 50 years of age. For Phase 2, 14 professional staff and 6 senior management and management with strategic input, human resources/staff development and equalities participated in structured interviews with questions informed by the survey. Data analysis for the survey was conducted using thematic analysis and the constant comparative method. Data analysis for the structured interviews is underway. Policy documents will be used to triangulate the data.

Initial Findings

Findings from Phase 1

Spaces for dialogue

Findings reveal spaces for dialogue are seen as important for inclusion. Dialogue is seen as very important with a requirement for enabling spaces to ensure inclusion and equal opportunities. This would be in line with Habermas' notions of dialogic spaces (1987).

Value

There is some questioning about the value of older workers both within the organisation and in wider society. There is some discriminatory sense, especially of female older workers. There was however, inconclusive agreement to the extent to which organisational culture, in this case study, values older workers. This will be further explored through the in-depth interviews.

Informal learning

The survey revealed the emphasis placed upon the value of informal learning experiences, as well as the recognition of older workers' informal learning experiences being validated.

Age blind professional development and learning

Concerning questions over the value of professional development, it was considered that differentiation was not the answer. Age blind professional development should be needs related regardless of career path, wide- ranging and open to all ages. There was a lack of opinion over how any gaps in professional development could be filled in what was offered to older workers.

Mobility and career progression

Mobility and career development is not seen as a priority by the organisation. Such a lack of mobility in existing roles is leading to staleness and some stagnation in roles. Older workers are seen as career irrelevant. However in contrast, there is a keenness and eagerness to continue in key careers as an older worker. A lack of profession specific training opportunities, to move into different areas, is hindering movement into other roles. An in house career offer is seen as supportive. There is a sense that a more holistic view of career trajectories in staff development would be helpful.

Strategic organisational development

It was considered that strategy and planning for professional development, to include older workers, needs constant reviewing to adapt to external and internal changes and alignment was needed for it to be part of strategic planning. There was a mixed view of the extent of the efficacy of the appraisal or staff review and development process in terms of reviewee expectations, achieving organisation objectives and in relevant training.

Significance for adult education research and contribution to the learning around older workers and workplaces as sites for learning

This doctoral research is work in progress, data analysis is currently underway to explore intersections and themes generated between Phase 1 and 2.

Building on the body of adult learning research, the study offers new perspectives on what older professional staff and management understand about learning and professional development of older workers; the implications and what it is to be engaged in learning in higher education as an older adult worker; captures what

forms of professional development are valuable and why; explores any similarities and differences seen between older workers and management; and sheds light on types of learning and professional development deemed valuable. It will propose new approaches to support adult professional learning in workplaces in the HE sector and beyond for older workers. From this, new perspectives may emerge through the process to understand how these forms of learning and professional development are informed. The significance for adult education is that it is not possible to see professional learning as merely tied to the workplace, focused on results, as older workers extending their working lives are seeking value in learning both for and beyond work, bringing in the possibility for further research into continuous adult lifelong learning and workplace learning in extended working lives. Characteristics of this grouping are not homogenous and the study will uncover new insights into vocabulary, practices and approaches for professional development and recommend strategic responses.

The aim is to develop a theoretical framework around older workers and workplace learning for best practice for professional development and workplace learning for ageing workforces. The final thesis will recommend strategic responses for HE management at micro-organisation and macro-organisational level, for affecting wider social policy change. However, the recommendations will be applicable to many other sectors.

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