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Schofield, Keith

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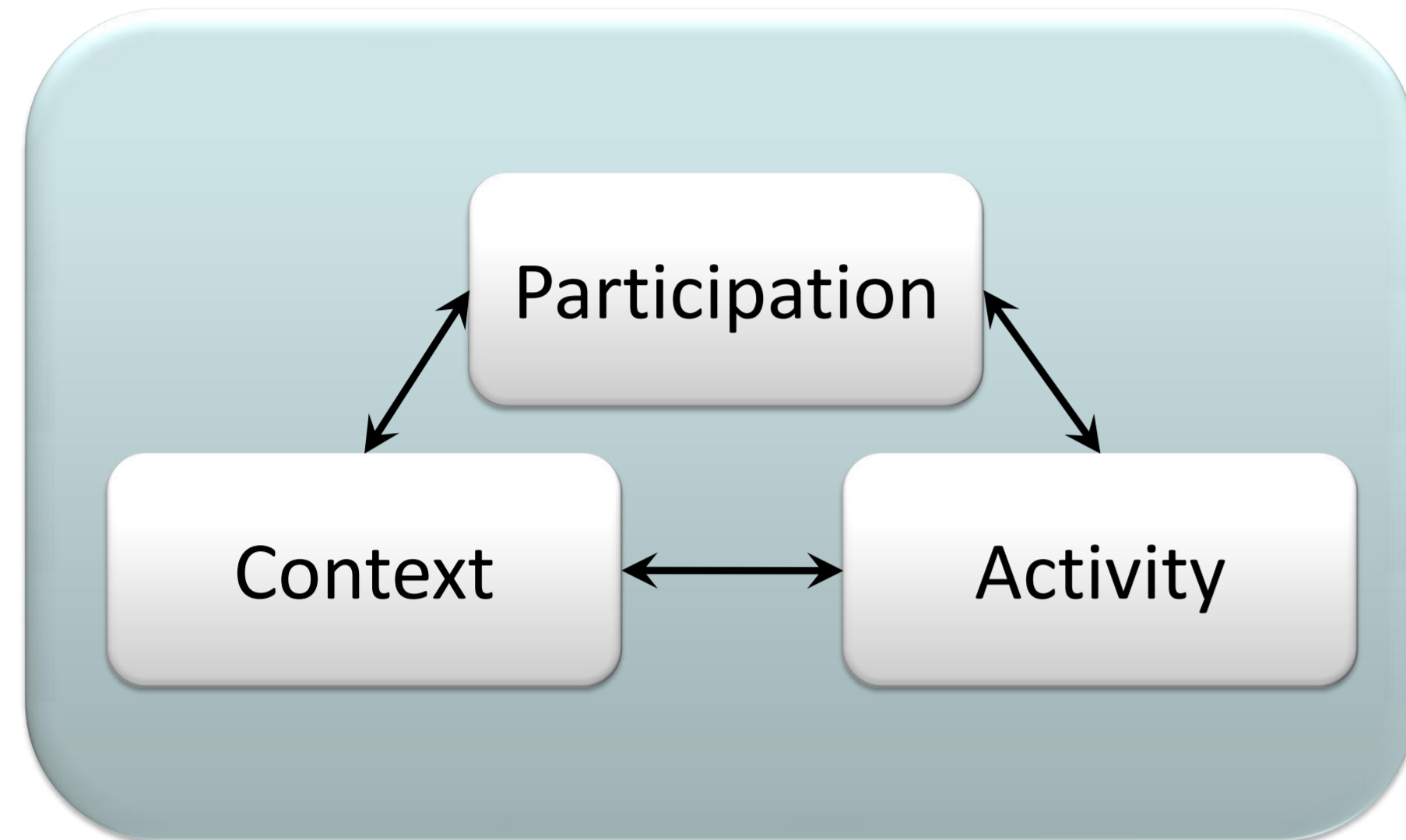
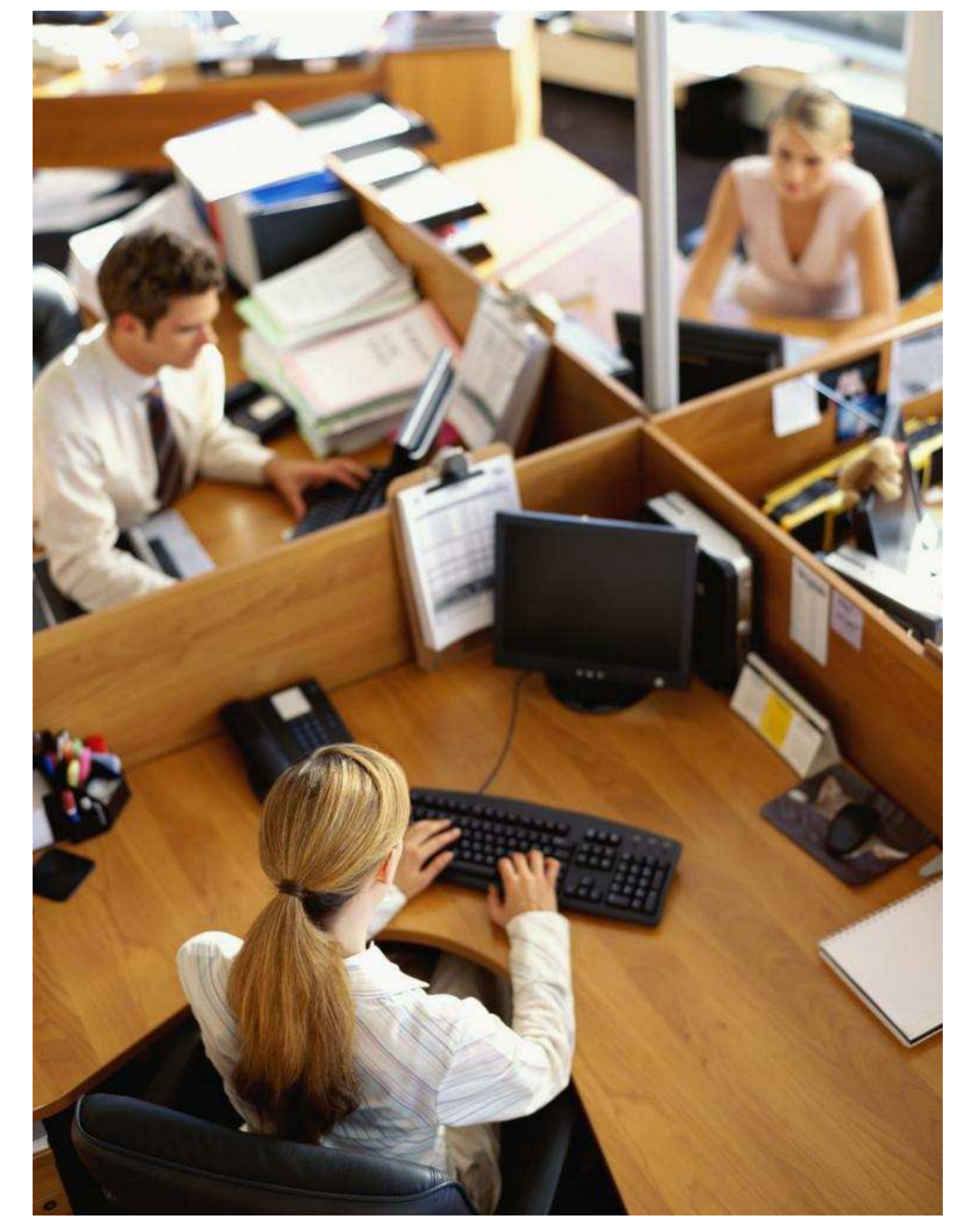
A Diagrammatical Representation of Organisational Learning Using Socio Cultural Theory

What is organisational learning?

Organisational learning is the concept of an organisation adapting and changing as they build, create and discover new knowledge that informs the change (Levitt & March, 1988). Levitt & March explain that there are three ways that an organisation learns, which they have drawn from a series of observational studies (Cyert & March, 1963; Nelson & Winter, 1982) these are:

- Routine – these are the practices of the organisation, they are the rules, procedures, strategies and norms that people follow in the workplace. They are constructed by the beliefs, cultures and knowledge that exist within the community.
- History - this essentially accepts that experiential lessons are learned by the organisation and this experience is known

It can be conceptualised in a number of ways, as a technical position (Huber, 1991) where the learning aspect of an organisations development is as a result of the processing and interpretation of reactive data that leads to new knowledge or the adaptation of existing processes (Argyris & Schön, 1976). An alternative perspective of organisational learning positions it as a social phenomenon where knowledge and understanding is derived from the experiences that people have within the natural workplace setting and as such learning is something that emerges from social interaction (Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999).

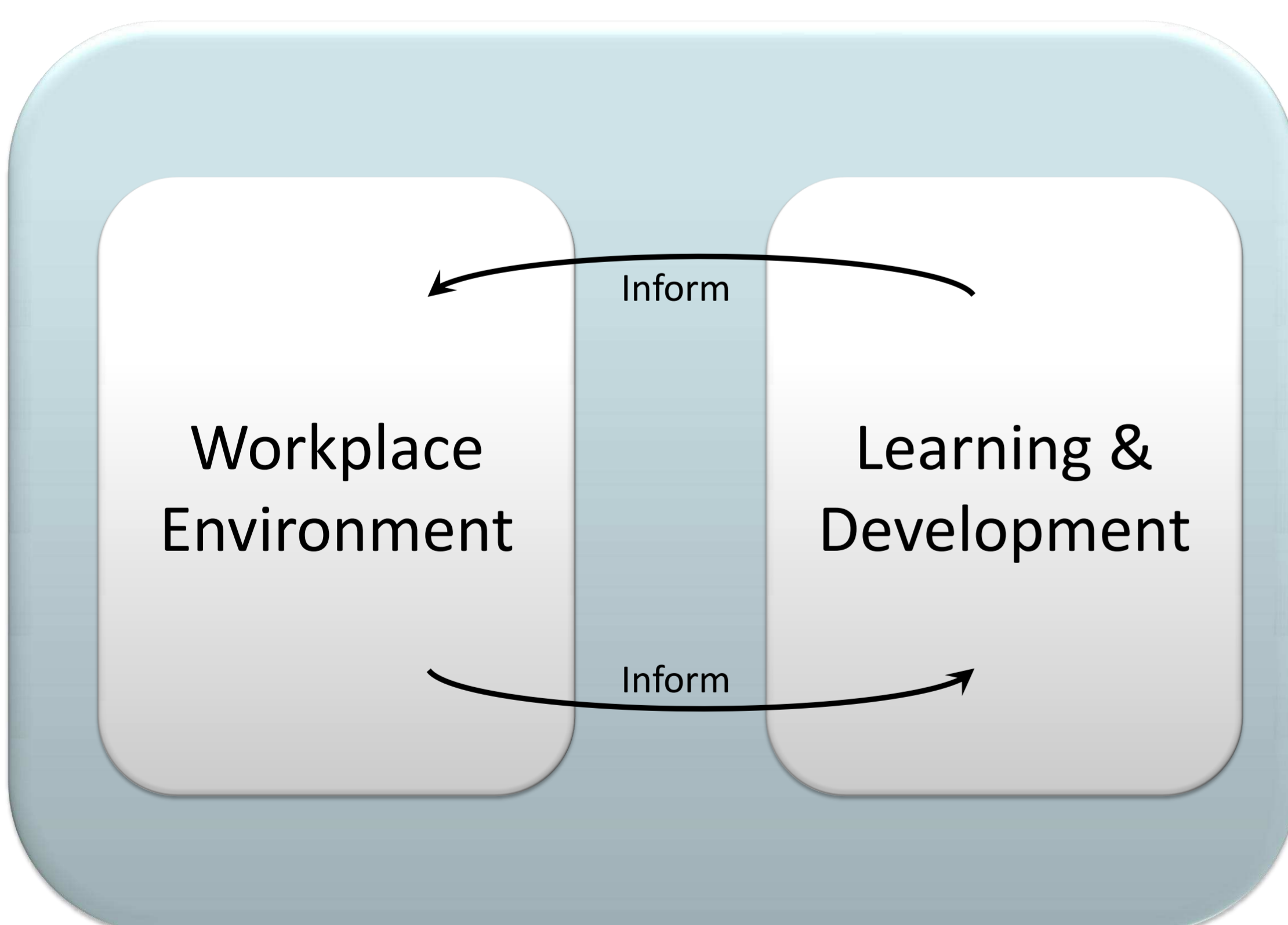


What is learning?

Lave & Wenger (1991) see learning as an activity that is situated within the context of the environment, the task that is being completed and the participation of those completing it. They explain that learning is, in contrast with the seemingly transmission based internalisation models discussed, “increasing participation in communities of practice [and therefore] concerns the whole person acting in the [social] world” (p.49). This notion positions knowledge as being embedded within the practices of the sociocultural environment that people operate in; it is through becoming a full participant within this community of practice that somebody learns and gets to know and understand this shared knowledge. The shared knowledge is created and shaped historically, culturally and situationally as different people interact with each other and their environment (Billett, 1998).

Learning as participation in practice

Based on the concept that knowledge is embedded within the communities of practice within which it is constructed, shaped and defined, Wenger (2003) explains that “knowing is an act of participation in complex ‘social learning systems’”. As the knowledge is embedded within the community, each member of the community that participates knows and shares a piece of that knowledge. The key, therefore, to learning within a community of practice is participation (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006; Wenger, 1998). Legitimate peripheral participation is the process that explains how individuals move from being a newcomer, a peripheral participant, to being an old timer, a full participant, within the community. This process is a complex one and is therefore not solely dependent on learning; other factors influence individual progression from being a peripheral participant to being a full participant such as relations of power. It is disempowering to be a peripheral participant, however legitimate, as you are not able to contribute to the practices of the community (Pemberton, Mavin, & Stalker, 2007). It is through relationships and identity shifts that learning and consequently participation can successfully develop. Further to this, Boud & Middleton (2003) explain that seniority within a community of practice leads to an increase in legitimacy as a full participant and therefore enhances the range of informal learning opportunities available. Whilst seniority may be determined by rank within the organisation, level of knowledge can also inform seniority in the shape of an “old timer” who, in practice, becomes the knowledge resource for those requiring help at work.



How does this relate to the workplace?

Within an organisational context, it is often the case that learning and development is managed and co-ordinated by a centralised training department (Wenger, 1998). As such, training events are focused on the design and delivery of these events in the context of the training room rather which is “separated from the communities in which their subject matter is relevant” (p.249), the workplace environment. Consequently, it would be difficult for a newcomer to a business to successfully participate within a community of practice if the knowledge that is required to do so has been transmitted, rather than distributed, out of context in a training room by a trainer who is a participant in a different community of practice.

If learning is conceptualised as I propose, as situated and embedded within a community of practice, then workplaces must adopt this strategy for their staff development as organisations are, for many people, “the only or most viable location to initially learn and/or develop further their vocational practice” (Billett, 2002). This type of learning is not, however, always readily accepted by organisations as being a valid or valuable form of learning as “it is typically regarded as being ‘part of the job or a mechanism for ‘doing the job properly’ and is thus rendered invisible as ‘learning’” (Boud & Middleton, 2003).

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Keith Schofield

Postgraduate Research Student

Email: k.schofield@hud.ac.uk

Directors of study:

Dr Jane Tobbell

Dr David Robinson