Introduction

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Introduction

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1   Workplace learning: expanding attention despite its fuzzy nature

Over the past three decades, workplace learning has become increasingly valued by practitioners and scholars. In corporate HRD as well as in vocational and professional education there is growing recognition of the critical value of workplace learning for the competency development of employees and students. In the contemporary era of lifelong learning many employees are even almost entirely depending on workplace learning as their one and only possibility for maintaining, improving and expanding their competency repertoire.

One of the most persistent problems in the debate on workplace learning concerns its definition. In general, workplace learning has been described as the relationship between two significant processes: working and learning (Jacobs and Park, 2009) but it seems almost impossible to come up with a more precise and unambiguous definition of workplace learning that is broadly welcomed. This is also acknowledged in our introduction of this special issue in which we adopt the line of reasoning that was proposed by Streumer and Kho (2006) who underlined that it is rather pointless to strive for the ultimate definition since workplace learning can be regarded as belonging to the category of fuzzy concepts which are typically, because of their nature, indefinable.

Though an all-inclusive definition covering the many existing appearances is at least one bridge too far it does make sense to attempt to identify some of its main features as was, e.g., demonstrated in the work of Streumer and van der Klink (2004) who proposed dimensions that are supportive in describing many different kinds of workplace learning. The idea of dimensions allows nuanced positioning of the various workplace learning practices on each separate dimension. Here, two of the main dimensions, formality and location, will be briefly outlined which of course do injustice to the rich discourses in which they usually are embedded.

Tynjälä (2008) claims that if researchers were asked to name the most typical feature of workplace learning most of them probably would mention informality. Informality refers to the unplanned nature of most learning. The other end of the dimension refers to highly structured intentional goal-driven learning through deliberate activities to achieve predefined goals. For example, in professional and vocational education emphasis is placed on providing opportunities for students to learn from work experiences during their practice in companies. Quite often this learning through work experiences is directed by learning goals that are predominantly set by their own school. The nature of these goals and their level of specificity differ considerably but in essence these are used to support students in engaging in particular work experiences [see e.g., the typology of work experiences proposed by Guile and Griffiths (2001)]. Despite the fact that vocational and professional education attempt to steer their students' workplace learning research findings indicate that most workplace learning has an unplanned character (Streumer, 2010, in press). Eraut et al. (2001) refer to this as 'reactive learning' implying the spontaneously nature of workplace learning that occurs as responses to changes in the work and/or learning environment.

In corporate training there too exist highly formal types of workplace learning, such as the systematically designed structured on-the-job training events proposed by Jacobs and Jones (1995) in which trainees learn the ropes of their job in a structured sequence under the direct guidance of a qualified trainer. Especially when there is need to assure transfer to other (job) settings then some kind of formalising of the learning, e.g., by planning opportunities or encouraging reflection sessions, becomes crucial (see e.g., Billett, 2002; Eraut, 2004). In general, however, the majority of workplace learning experiences can be labelled as rather informal learning. Most learning occurs incidentally as a side effect of other (working) activities. Interesting accounts of everyday incidental learning have been reported by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Resnick (1987). These accounts do not imply that informal learning cannot be encouraged but this requires a different mind set than is present in the educational conceptualisations of learning. Examples of powerful interventions to encourage informal learning are creating a challenging context, allowing participation in different kinds of work activities and communities, assuring cooperation between workers (Fuller et al., 2005).

One might expect that there exist considerable agreement upon the location of workplace learning, which is usually the work setting. However, the terms work and workplace are problematic, for their conventional usage tends to ignore important spheres of unpaid work in homes and communities and to assume that work is based in unitary, identifiable, geographically organised places and activities [Fenwick, (2001), pp.3–4]. Whereas many scholars implicitly assume that workplace learning by definition takes place near or in the actual and daily job setting, others expand this notion by also including kinds of learning that take place within the scope of the employee's organisation but not necessarily in the work setting itself. For example, the framework proposed by Jacobs and Park (2009) includes off-the-job learning as a subcategory of workplace learning.

The expanding possibilities provided by the latest technologies question even further the definition of the workplace as a physical location. The latest advanced ICT software and tools allow many employees to perform work duties from other places than their office. There are more possibilities to work from one's own home; there is an increase of working in project groups at different locations and/or in different time zones. It is therefore becoming appropriate to define the workplace as any setting in which an

employee is performing work duties, even if this location is his/her home. The notion of what constitutes a workplace can also be questioned by the rise of opportunities for designing high-fidelity simulations of work settings. These simulations allow an optimal correspondence between simulated work activities and one's competencies, offering possibilities to learn and experiment safely which cannot be easily provided in the authentic work setting because of various kinds of severe risks for individuals and work processes.

These two-dimensions clearly indicate that workplace learning covers a wide range of different kinds of learning. Besides these two rather basic dimensions others have been proposed for describing, positioning and comparing workplace learning practices more precisely. For example, Streumer and van der Klink (2004) mention other dimensions that could be supportive for understanding the wide range of workplace learning practices: directing the learning processes (who is directing and to what extend), and the nature of the learning processes occurring in workplace learning (ranging from learning by social interaction to learning from theory).

It is however clear that the debate will be continued since every proposal for further defining workplace learning encounters problems. The idea of dimensions seems to be an interesting step forwards but nevertheless it should be noted that the dimensions have ambiguous labels as was shown above for the location dimension. It goes without saying that the discussion of its precise demarcating will be continued but that does not really seem to hinder the research on this topic. On the contrary! Though the research on workplace learning is still in its infancy there are a booming number of publications investigating very different aspects of this phenomenon. The absence of clarity about what workplace learning actually consists, however, places more responsibility on the involved researchers to define clearly their own points of view.

2 Boundaries of workplace learning

The goal of this special issue is to contribute to our understanding of the boundaries of workplace learning by presenting various studies that address limitations of workplace learning and possibilities to cope with these limitations. There are a number of limitations that are strongly linked to the research and practice of workplace learning: the role of knowledge, the focus on the individual learner, connecting workplace learning with education, and the issue of designing learning in the workplace, respectively.

One subject that is frequently discussed relates to the undervalued position of knowledge and its acquisition during workplace learning, certainly when this concerns workplace learning of an informal nature. Eraut (2004) believes that the 'anti-intellectualist tendency' of recent years played a significant role in this: knowledge and specialist knowledge was no longer being assessed at its true value. In addition, there was a lack of understanding of how theoretical knowledge can be applied to functioning in practice. This problem is all the greater when theoretical knowledge is learned separately from practice. But even when theory is learned in relation to a concrete work situation, it has to undergo a number of adaptations in order to be applied in a different (more or less comparable) work situation. This is designated the decontextualisation and recontextualisation of knowledge. Meanwhile, the role of knowledge in learning a

profession has once again started to receive a great deal of attention (Young, 2008): without theory there can be no practice!

One of the main critiques on workplace learning studies pertains to their small-scale nature with a strong focus on the individual learner and the learning process itself, leaving unattended the organisational context that shapes learning (Ashton, 2004). Many authors (Engeström and Middleton, 1998; Caley, 2000; Harris, 2000) are convinced that learning is not, and cannot be, a purely individual matter

Moreover, the issue of the longer-term impact of workplace learning on career and employability has remained unanswered and requires further attention, since it appears that different workplace learning activities have a different impact on employees' employability. Especially, the opportunities embedded in the workplace for establishing and maintaining networks with significant others appear to be conducive for one's employability (Van der Heijden et al., 2009).

This explains the widespread attention being paid to the 'collaborative nature of learning'. Marsick (2001) believes that workplace learning is therefore not only valuable and motivating for individual employees, both current and future, but also has particular value for the organisation as a whole. Taking it one step further, it is not only that the surplus value for individual learning processes is important for the organisation, but also that a great deal of learning has its origins in cooperative relationships with colleagues on the work floor. What is then seen is a learning organisation or knowledge institution, where learning is a collective affair. For this reason, workplace learning must focus more deliberately on facilitating collective learning processes. In doing so, self-directed learning and self-reflection should also be taken into consideration. Self-directed learning offers learners the opportunity, wholly or partly, to assume responsibility for the direction and structure of the learning process. Self-reflection ensures that learners can give active meaning to the experiences that they have acquired during their work and can adapt their repertoire of standards and values in relation to their work (this is also designated the psychological variant of reflection).

A third limitation relates to the often still inadequate curriculum structure of professional training programmes, resulting in a failure to achieve good quality coordination between education and the labour market. This involves in particular the question of how the theory component (the school component of the curriculum) and the practice component (the part of the curriculum in which – simulated – forms of workplace learning occupy a central role) of the curriculum should be dovetailed. Tynjälä (2009) draws attention to this problem "(….) the separation between work and learning (….)" and states "(….) the remedy for the problem is the better integration of these domains'. (p.12) This in her opinion can be translated into an 'integrative pedagogy'. Other authors too (Engeström, 2000; Griffiths and Guile, 2003; Stenström and Tynjälä, 2009; Tynjälä, 2009; Volanen, 2009) underline the importance of this integration. Stenström and Tynjälä (2009) focus on learning that takes place at the interface between education and work. The linking theoretical concepts that they suggest here are 'connectivity' and 'transformation'. Connectivity refers to "(….) those processes which aim at creating close relationships and connections between different elements of learning situations, contexts of learning, and systems aiming at promoting learning". The second term refers to "changes and development processes that flow from connecting different elements of learning". (p.14). Eventually, the interaction between the two should result in the integration of working and learning at an individual, collective, organisational, regional, national and global level, and thus in the complete breaking

down of barriers between education and work. It would seem that, just like Nijhof and Nieuwenhuis (2008) and Reenalda et al. (2006, 2008), the above-mentioned authors argue for a combination of effective learning forms (at the workplace) which, given certain learning tasks, produce the best results.

Finally, following on from the preceding 'limitation', in the past ten to fifteen years a relatively large amount of research has been conducted into factors that promote workplace learning. This relates to factors that can be typified as characteristics of the learner, characteristics of the learning (work) environment and factors of an organisational nature. This study is of course focused on identifying significant factors and subsequently on being able to intervene in a controlled manner in the implementation of learning processes at the workplace. A study by Reenalda et al. (2008) reveals that 'characteristics of the learning environment' in particular are crucial to achieving learning effects. To that end it should, however, be noted that no single effective learning environment exists, but that, depending on what must or can be learned, the 'right' learning form must be deployed. Personal characteristics scarcely have any effect on this. An unambiguous answer to the question of what an effective learning environment at the workplace should look like still requires many years of research.

3   Introducing the articles in this issue

The research community of workplace learning can be characterised as an international, vivid and heterogeneous gathering of members with very different scientific backgrounds and favouring quite different streams of inquiry, resulting into a kaleidoscopic set of lenses that are currently applied for investigating workplace learning. This assures that workplace learning receives frequent attention in almost all journals in the fields of HRD and vocational and professional education.

In this special issue, the focus is on the boundaries of workplace learning. Notwithstanding its significance, workplace learning cannot be regarded as the exclusive and ultimate solution for very different challenges and problems. Whereas, some research studies have emphasised its possibilities, others have pointed at various ponderous disadvantages that to some extent seem to be almost inherent to workplace learning. This is also reflected in this special issue that seeks to attempt presenting a collection of research articles that addresses possibilities, challenges and drawbacks of workplace learning, with the emphasis on the boundaries of workplace learning.

Simone van Zolingen and Laura Wortel present in their contribution a model for workplace learning that is based on Onstenk's previous work in this area and this model is supplemented by additional literature study to assure it reflects the state of the art. The model distinguishes informal learning possibilities, more formalised learning opportunities, and managerial interventions to encourage learning and training, respectively. After describing this model the authors present the findings of a case study in a Dutch water board among various staff members, in order to improve the empirical basis of the model. Their findings indicate that participants experienced various boundaries. The nature of the experienced boundaries was partly linked to participants' age. Moreover, their model for workplace learning appeared to be supportive in examining workplace learning in a sophisticated manner but the authors are aware of the

fact that more research is needed for formulating more conclusive remarks about the model's quality.

Margaret Malloch approaches the issue of workplace learning from the perspective of employers. Her study focuses on the perceptions of Australian employers concerning the use and value of accredited training. Findings indicate, not surprisingly, that employers main focus is on what is needed 'to get the job done' and they experience educational providers are not delivering what they really need. This contrasts, however, with the needs of employees since for them it is more beneficial to be engaged in learning opportunities that also has value beyond the scope of their current job. Both sides are addressed in Malloch's article and she concludes with recommendations to further improve learning and working.

Josephine Lappia and Jan Streumer presents the findings of an exploratory design study on work-related learning arrangements in which students as a team were engaged in learning the ropes of the profession. For several months groups of students were allocates within the same organisation and worked along with professionals. Drawing primarily on the work of Kessels the authors developed a framework that focuses on the internal consistency (instructional design approach) and external consistency (frequent contacts with and agreement upon all stakeholders) of the work-related learning arrangements. Two tracks were investigated, one in teacher training and a second one in building and construction. Their findings revealed several drawbacks and also enable the formulation of concrete design guidelines to further enhance the implementation of these kinds of arrangements, improving the internal as well as the external consistency.

Mary Johnsson, David Boud and Nicky Solomon discuss learning that is embedded in the relations within work settings. Based on the findings of two case studies, one in a winery and a second one in a public utility, the authors demonstrate how complex patterns of contextual, interactive and discursive factors influence how relations are constructed to achieve learning. The authors use their findings to challenge conventional boundaries of workplace learning, and they conclude with formulating implications for contemporary HRD practices.

Marcel van der Klink, Jo Boon and Kathleen Schlusmans investigated the informal learning activities and its outcomes of 24 Open University employees with the use of an interview scheme. Their findings indicate that participants tend to choose informal learning activities they could perform all alone, thus without active involvement of others, and their learning activities results into becoming more skilled or knowledgeable in tasks and duties participants already performed. The main reason for participants to become engage in informal learning was changes in their jobs that forced them to take action. Though their interview scheme resulted into a fruitful collection of findings which even allowed some quantification the authors question its usage for larger samples and they come up with recommendations for further advancing the research on informal learning.

Last but not the least, the article of Christian Harteis presents the findings of two studies into workplace learning. The first study used a questionnaire that was administered to employees and managers of different branches. The questionnaire addressed conditions conducive to competence development in participants' daily working live. Findings revealed that the entire sample did only mention supportive conditions but further analysis of different subgroups and of single items revealed a more nuanced picture of some less favourable conditions. A rather similar pattern was observed in a second study that consisted of a Delphi-study among managers and workers

employed in the automotive sector. Harteis concludes with recommendations to further investigate restrictions and limitations of workplace learning.

This special issue concludes with an epilogue of Jeroen Onstenk who discusses a number of common themes in the articles of this special issue of *IJHRDM*, like the question of which goals workplace learning should serve, the types of learning processes that are involved in workplace learning, where he makes a distinction between 'learning as acquisition' and 'learning as participation'. Furthermore, he examines the boundaries and limitations of workplace learning and the importance and differences of workplace learning in professional education and HRD.

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