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A Typological Look into Learning Cultures in Workplaces: From Malicious to Demanding

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Abstract

This study aimed at identifying learning cultures in various workplaces thorough an emergent grounded theory study. To gather data, in-depth interviews were conducted on 127 employees of small to large companies to reach a vast breadth and depth of data. For the purpose of inclusiveness, a maximum variation strategy was adopted for sampling to select participants purposively from manufacturing, knowledge-based, business and service companies. The data were thematically analyzed at two levels, namely initial and secondary coding. To establish credibility, three dominant strategies were continuously used as member check, peer debriefing and external auditing. Consequently, a tripartite typology emerged to represent learning cultures in various enterprises based on three criteria: management approach, peers' reaction, promotion expectancy. To sum up, in the malicious learning culture, bad working habits are learnt and shared by staff and commitment to work is gradually minimized to the lowest possible. In the deterministic learning culture, a neutral learning climate dominates the workplace as staff perceive no link between self-development and job promotion. Finally, in the demanding learning culture people may clearly view sensible links between competency development and job promotion, so they try their utmost to keep up with the latest developments in their field to avert the risk of demotion or job loss. The study suggests that if enterprises plan to achieve and keep a competitive edge, they should focus firmly on creating a demanding workplace learning culture.

Keywords: workplace learning, learning culture, learning culture in workplace

1. Introduction

As we move into a knowledge society, with its emphasis on knowledge building, it is learning that becomes more and more important. Workplace learning is a key part of this, driven by the impact of changes in demographics, skills demands, technologies, and peoples' relationship and roles within various institutions and communities. Transitions from school to work are not as distinct and linear as they once were. Learning is no longer confined to a "front loaded" activity in a formalized, classroom environment. Works and careers are no longer static and predetermined entities. Knowledge is not necessarily individualized. The way an entire organization learns can be instrumental in its innovation and profitability (Vaughan, 2008).

It seems that workplace is now unanimously recognized as a ground for both working and learning. These two are so highly interwoven that rarely one can imagine any regression into old training departments and classroom-based courses for the staff upskilling. I believe Stephen Billet (2002) has well summarized why workplace learning has been gaining prominence in both academic and practitioners' circles:

Firstly, for many workers, the workplace provides the most likely situation to initially develop vocational knowledge. For these workers, there are either no existing courses for their vocational specialization, or those that do exist are either inaccessible or inappropriately presented to workers or both. Accordingly, the experiences and support provided by workplaces are often the primary or only sources of individuals' initial learning of their vocational practice as well as its further and ongoing development throughout their working lives.

Secondly, workplace experiences make important contributions to learning vocational practice. Many highly prized vocational preparation programs (e.g., for the trades, law, medicine) include lengthy periods of workplace experiences (e.g., as apprentices, articled clerks, interns). Acceptance into these vocations is not possible without lengthy periods of workplace practice supervised by more experienced coworkers.

Thirdly, workplace experiences are increasingly being prized in educational programs for diverse purposes

ranging from understanding the "world of work", the development of specific vocational skills or to contextualize what has been learnt in educational institutions. However, again it is the exception that workplace experiences are conceptualized as providing kinds of learning which are legitimate in their own right. Instead, they are often seen as providing experiences that augment and support what is being taught in educational institutions.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, most of the ongoing development of worker's skills throughout their working lives will occur through participation in work. Vocational practice changes and the requirements for work performance transforms over time. Therefore, robust, strongly empirical and conceptual bases for how learning at work should best proceed—pedagogy for the workplace—is now urgently warranted to inform how vocational development should proceed through working lives. This pedagogy is particularly important during a period in which many enterprises are withdrawing their responsibility for the maintenance of their workers, skill currency, viewing this as an individual obligation. Without a clear account of how learning proceeds at work, it is difficult to appraise the consequences of this, or other issues associated with learning through work.

Since early 1980s, a growing interest in "workplace learning" gathered momentum and many researchers began to explore the phenomenon in its various aspects, most notably Stephen Billet (2002, 2001, 1996, 1995, 2005) who focused mainly on developing a workplace pedagogy and curriculum model; Alison Fuller and Loran Unwin (2003) who developed a bi-polar continuum on apprenticeship practices in UK workplaces; Lee Utech (2008) who developed a contextualized curriculum model for workplace education; Mary Bellifore (1996) who proposed a curriculum development model for workplaces; Mudler, Cate, Daalder and Berkvens (2010) who devised a competency-based workplace curriculum around trustable professional activities; and Pamela Matthews (1999) who developed an holistic model tor workplace learning. But what helped the trend to keep on track and build a more solid foundation was the advent of "situated cognition" theory in learning psychology. This theory was a harsh reaction to "information processing" theories for their overemphasis on mental processes in decontextualized circumstances (e.g., school, colleges) and overlooking what really occurs in authentic situations, such as workplaces, during learning. Jean lave is recognized as the founder of this rather new school of thought who deemed learning not just as processing information in the brain, but as enculturation in real contexts. Hence, this new generation of scholars began to explore learning in real contexts and offered six critical concepts that are helpful in understanding learning in everyday sites as follow (Safaei Movahhed & Mobebbat, 2012)

- community of practice
- cognitive apprenticeship
- legitimate peripheral participation
- authentic
- learning as enculturation
- authentic assessment

As may be seen, these concepts have turned into buzzwords in current debates on learning, especially in the workplace. It seems situated cognition scholars were the first in psychological circles who deemed learning as enculturation in authentic contexts and developed solid theoretical foundation for better understanding workplace learning through the cultural psychology viewpoint.

As aforementioned literature implied, workplaces are now believed to be the most fertile ground for gaining contextualized knowledge and expertise. But what goes around in research circles is aligned with what really occurs in typical workplaces (not top 10 or 50 best companies which are usually introduced annually in various reports). Are workplaces really assisting in ongoing development of staff through everyday work activities?

To analyze the above questions and explore into workplace learning, theoretical lens is needed to better examine how workplace structures may assist or impede learning. While culture has been used widely by management scholars since late 1970s to portray the dynamics of organizations (Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013), but one can rarely find research papers or any other writings which may shed light on learning cultures in enterprises and how the different work environments may prevent or encourage learning in practice. Although there are some scholars who used the term "learning culture" in their works, but they are mainly imaging an ideal workplace learning culture rather than giving a descriptive image of what goes on in different typical workplaces. For instance, Conner and Clawson (2004) put forward five strategies for instituting a learning culture in the workplace as follow:

- learning must be appreciated in the workplace, both verbally and in practice;
- there should be a vision of continuous improvement for creating a better future;
- developing a learning culture must be followed persistently and not made into a single-shot event;
- benchmark the elite enterprises to find out what they do to create a learning culture into daily routines.

As may be seen, Conner and Clawson follow a normative line and prescribe some guidelines on how to create an idealized learning culture. Other scholars like Marsick and Watkins (2003) deem learning culture as the characteristic of a leaning organization and offer a prescriptive image as well. These conceptions are in sharp contrast to what is considered as "learning cultures" (plural form emphasized) in this paper. To clarify the stance, the author holds onto descriptive anthropological conception of culture and borrows the following definition from Verduijn and Heijboer (2016): "a collective, dynamic system of basic assumptions, values and norms which direct the learning of people within on organization". This definition is aligned with the anthropological understanding of culture and gives one a useful tool to analyze the different explicit and implicit layers of beliefs and actions of a workplace learning culture. Hence, the stance is adopted here to analyze better how different workplace cultures may impede or cheer learning.

2. Research Methods

This research adopts an explorative qualitative strategy to identify how different learning cultures function in workplaces. Companies were selected purposively based on their mission and were grouped into manufacturing, knowledge, trade and service entities. To gather data, in-depth interviews were conducted on 127 staff of small to large companies to reach a vast breadth and depth of data. Therefore, for purpose of inclusiveness, a maximum variation strategy was used for sampling. Data were analyzed by typological analysis as a research strategy (Ayers & Knafl, 2008). Typological analysis is a strategy for descriptive qualitative (or quantitative) data analysis whose goal is the development of a set of related but distinct categories within a phenomenon that discriminate across the phenomenon.

Data were analyzed at two levels (namely initial and secondary coding) and a tripartite typology emerged to represent various workplace learning cultures based on three criteria: management approach, peers' attitudes, and promotion expectancy. Also, to establish credibility, three dominant strategies were continuously used; namely member check, peer debriefing and external auditing.

3. Results

Based on the data, it seems that three factors contribute to shaping any learning cultures in the workplaces:

1) Management approach towards learning and development: Senior managers and organization leaders may impact learning cultures in positive or negative ways. When learning is integrated into corporate strategies and top managers express their commitment to ongoing staff upskilling, the learning culture tilts toward a positive developing stance and vice versa.

2) Peers' attitude: colleagues are critically influential in shaping the learning cultures. They form either informal communities of practice to facilitate and develop workplace learning or make press gangs to impede any effort to promotion and development.

3) Promotion expectancy: people are more likely to contribute positively to workplace learning when they perceive a sensible and fair link between learning, improved performance and job promotion. In some workplaces where nepotism and cronyism rule over competency, the culture turns into a learning-free identity.

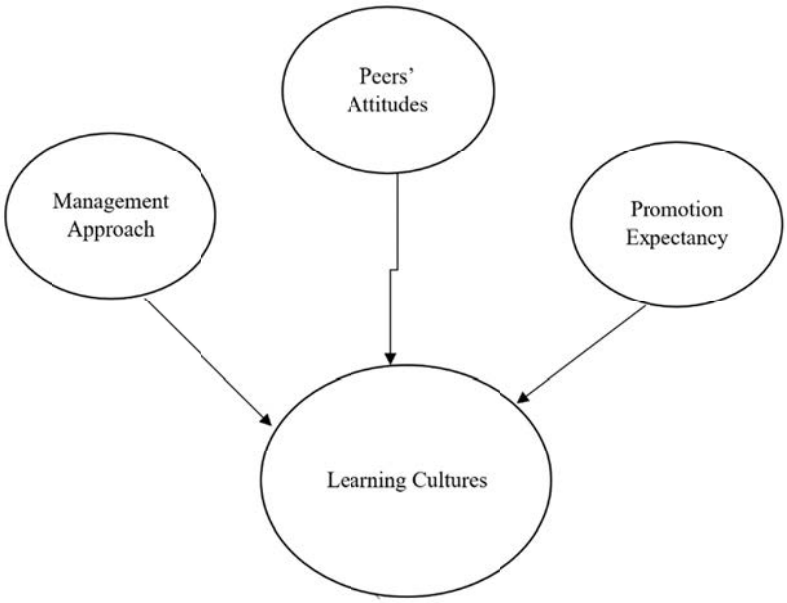

Figure 1. Factors contributing to shaping learning cultures

The data were analyzed thematically and a tripartite learning culture typology emerged as follow:

1) Malicious learning culture: In the such working environments, bad working habits are learnt and shared by staff and job commitment is gradually minimized to its lowest possible points. This condition often emanates from negative job climate where informal groups turn into press gangs to alter a poor-managed and usually unjust enterprise. Hence, top managers and organization leaders do not care about developing people and refer to the vast pool of job applicants who are ready to replace the vacancies in the blink of an eye. As a result, staff try to keep the status quo by any means and punish or discourage anyone who tends to learn and improve the conditions so that the organization benefits more.

"I was really shocked when I found out that how any tendency to learning and improving performance is humiliated and subjugated by co-workers! Yes; they are furious at how they are treated as slaves and no one wants to contribute to learning and improving." An experienced supervisor explained. "When I came into this auto-manufacturing company, I decided to draw up on my latest studies to form a community of practice. But their cold sight ruined me very soon" a novice staff and new college graduate said.

2) Deterministic learning culture: In such a culture, a rather neutral climate dominates the workplace as most staff perceive a poor link between learning, improving performance and job promotion. Although learning is valued and recognized to some extent to meet "social desirability rule", but one needs more than learning to be promoted. Most often, cronyism and nepotism implicitly rule over competency and one needs to join strong lobbies to go up the success ladder. As a result, those who do not have strong lobbying skills become frustrated very soon and "learnt helplessness" takes over.

"Why should I join learning communities while people are promoted on criteria rather that performance" a young engineer believes. "Learning is important for top managers because they want to get most out of us. But when it comes to promotion and job advancement, you need to have friends in high positions." another software engineer believes.

3) Demanding learning culture: it seems that this learning culture is most valued in workplaces where gaining the competitive edge is integrated in all work aspects. Top managers and leaders require staff to improve their performance, and any job promotion is based on staffs' progress profile. As people usually work in teams, they need to share their learning to improve one another (as teams are usually rewarded for their contributions, team learning is valued). People perceive a sensible link between learning, performance improvement and promotion on a team level and try to meet their key performance indicators by devising their own professional development plans. "I need to join strong professional communities in my workplace to survive here. My job changes and becomes more and more demanding, so I need to keep abreast of the latest developments by joining the existing professional communities. Ongoing learning is a part of our job and that's the way it is!" a young psychologist

admits. Such a learning culture is usually depicted as “a learning organization” in the literature (Conner & Clawson, 2004; Marsick & Watkins, 2003; Senge, 1990). In most writings on the learning culture, authors often try to draw such an idealized and utopian image of the concept.

4. Discussion

“Learning is no more confined to schools and colleges. Workplaces require people to continually improve their performance to survive in the current volatile and ever-changing world”. Statements like the above are abundant in the related literature, but they sound like beautiful slogans in many workplaces. Although many high-profile companies have provided such fertile grounds for developing their staff and benefiting from their human resources, but there are also other enterprises that overlook the fact and pay little, if any, attention to learning and development.

Hence, to understand such variety and how learning occurs in different workplaces, adopting an anthropological stance may be helpful. As culture “is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a human as a member of society (Taylor, 1871 as cited by Tischler, 2011), it can be used as a useful tool for analyzing the leaders, managers, and other employees’ attitudes and beliefs towards learning in the workplace, and how and why these are shaped and changed as time goes on. Learning culture is a recent concept in the workplace learning literature, and owes much of its use to scholars who drew upon the term to depict the idealized and utopian circumstances in enterprises (Marsick & Watkins, 2003; Conner & Clawson, 2004; Senge, 1990). Although this prescriptive conception of the term may help us to design a road map, but it cannot function as an analytical tool for scanning the current circumstances. Hence, this paper provides a typological analytical tool to better understand the status quo for any further improvement plans.

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