

Out of the cul de sac¹: reflections on the workplace as a learning environment



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¹ A **cul-de-sac** is a dead-end street with only one inlet/outlet and a turnaround area at its closed end. Cul-de-sac literally means "ass of a bag" (cul in French is considered a vulgar slang meaning "ass" when used alone in a sentence) or "bottom of a sack". Despite seeming to be borrowed French phrase, the expression cul-de-sac originated in England during the period when French was spoken by the English aristocracy.

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the workplace as a learning environment, and explores the use of an *evaluative management culture* in workplace learning. An evaluative management culture, which is one that comes from within a workplace environment, sits well with an organisational approach to capacity building, that is building from within the workplace. Given new dimensions in learning and knowledge, and the changing context of the workplace in New Zealand, it argues that a focus on learning to improve practice and enhance the flexibility of employees is important to transform workplaces to learning organisations. Understandings of workplace learning and the future of the organisation of workplace practices are changing dramatically in New Zealand. In understanding these relationships, a conceptual framework for learning to work and working to learn has been developed.

INTRODUCTION

What is workplace learning? The Tertiary Education Commission (formerly Skill New Zealand) defines workplace learning as *'the formal acquisition of skills and knowledge in the workplace'*. This can be employment based, where the employee is learning at their place of work, or where someone who is not an employee of the organisation comes into the workplace for the purpose of on-site training. 'Work' and 'learning' are concepts which used to belong in separate categories. Work was about production and outputs and employees went to work to make a living. On the other hand, learning was something that happened before one went to work. Although some form of training was acceptable in the workplace, this was usually only at the beginning of employment. However, the twenty first century has seen a rapid movement in the changing contexts of work and learning. In part, this transformation is due to the recognition of the power and importance of workplaces as sites of learning (Billett, 1996). This means that the nature of work is changing as 'knowledge' becomes recognised as *the* primary resource (Boud and Garrick, 1999), and there is a demand for flexible learning delivered in the workplace setting.

Workplace learning is becoming a more frequent development in both management and education with a shift to both public and private sector agencies and universities. Understandings of workplace learning are becoming more clearly linked to sustainable new knowledge and the development of *knowledge workers* and *learning organisations*. So what is workplace learning? During a working day employees usually undertake a variety of activities and thus gain experience in the workplace. Workplace learning is the recognition of the learning achieved from those activities and experiences, but can only be defined as workplace learning if there is evidence of learning (Hager, 1999). There needs to be a clear distinction between activity, experience and what is actually learnt. *"If learning comes through experience, it*

follows that the more one participates in guided experiences, the more one learns. Venturing into uncharted waters and experiencing the failures that may occur is an important part of organisational learning” (Nevis, DiBella and Gould, 1995).

The changing contexts of work

The transformations that have occurred in the workplace since what is often called the computer revolution or the information age have been in part responsible for the altered contexts of work on people’s experiences and expectations of work. A further changing of the context of work is that of globalisation. Globalisation refers to a pattern of events which has been facilitated by technological changes, economic shifts and organisational restructurings (Castells, 1996, Robertson, 1992). This course of transformation to a post-industrial, informational society presents opportunities for robust discussions about the future of work (Casey, 1999).

Developing a learning environment in the workplace has essentially three main components. These are:

- Creating learning opportunities
- Facilitating and promoting learning at work
- Monitoring and evaluating learning effectiveness

Creating learning opportunities in the workplace certainly has its challenges, because learning needs and opportunities vary for different people and different jobs. These learning opportunities can be either informal or formal, and are usually linked to the needs of the team, the organisation and what learning opportunities are available for employees. One of the common and formal ways of identifying workplace learning opportunities is creating and developing a learning plan as a part of individual and team performance plans. And again, strategies are developed in the workplace to ensure that these learning plans reflect the range and scope of the employees needs. A by product of the performance plan or appraisal is that the organisation or workplace facilitates the individual and team access to participation in learning opportunities. This facilitation will ensure that there is effective liaison with training and development specialists who will ensure that the learning opportunities reflect and enhance individual, team and organisational performance. Creating learning opportunities is always focussed on the organisations skill base, and there may be an array of activities which facilitate workplace learning, which can vary from new employees observing experienced employees, to new skills being learnt to motivating employees to learn new things to make their jobs more challenging and interesting. There are ranges of learning opportunities that exist for employees in an organisation. These are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Learning opportunities at work

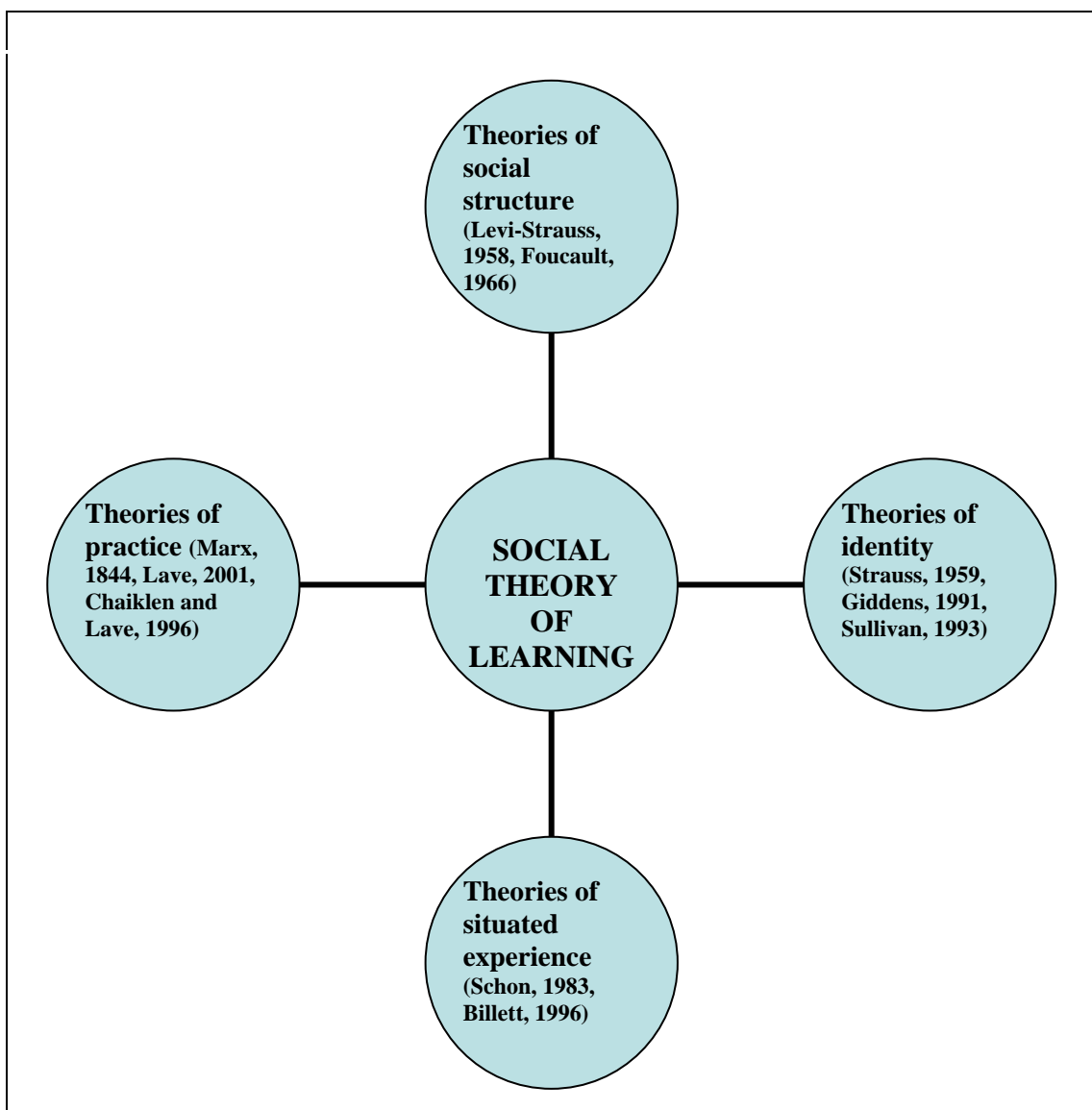
Learning opportunities	Description exemplars
Formal education	Can be in-house, university papers or courses, undertaking research, distance learning
Self-directed learning	Reading journal articles, updating knowledge via the internet
Opportunities within job	Coaching, mentoring, peer review of practice, job rotation,

	involvement with the wider organisation, project management work, supervision, reflection on day-to-day practice, informal discussion with colleagues, secondments
Opportunities outside job	Job rotation, visits to other centres, conference presentations, secondments

Facilitating and promoting learning at work

Learning has traditionally focused on the individual rather than the context. However, the shift to recognition of learning in everyday settings has becoming increasingly a research focus in the last decade. The key message in this paper is to understand the workplace as a learning environment, and in order to so, we need to acknowledge theories of some kind. There are wide diversity of theories that are relevant to workplace learning (Hager, 1999), and Figure 1 shows the two main axes of social theories of learning.

Figure 1: The social theory of learning showing social structure and action (adapted from Lave and Wegner, 1996)



Theories of social practice address the ways that we specifically engage with our workplace world. Hence they are concerned with learning in everyday workplace activities and real-life workplace situations. Theories of identity are more concerned with the social engagement of workplace teams and culture of the workplace and learning opportunities. Learning in these contexts allows for workplace development and learning occurring.

Learning in everyday settings has been coined *situated learning* (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Billett, 1996). Situated learning as a process of a participation in a community of practice has enormous implications for the promotion and facilitation for learning at work. Theories of situated learning emphasise the dynamics of everyday learning and interaction, and focus on the interactive relationship between the employee and their workplace environment. These theories focus on the experience and the construction of workplace events. Situated learning theory provides models of learning in context, and states that *learning to do* occur in a workplace context (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Billett, 1996). An important part of situated learning theory is the construction of knowledge within the social and cultural circumstances in which it is experienced. The workplace is an authentic setting for the development of vocational knowledge (Kerka, 1997).

A constructivist² view of learning focuses on the processes which learners build on when interacting with a workplace environment. This means that rather than employees passively receiving objective knowledge that is ‘in *the workplace*’, they will actively construct new workplace knowledge through the integration of new information and experiences they have learned ‘on *the job*’. Their pedagogical focus is task orientated and they favour hands-on, self directed activities (Piaget, 1954). Socio-cultural constructivism argues that knowledge is gained through an employee’s interaction in their workplace through cultures, communities and practices (Billett, 1995). These types of knowledge are often described cognitively as **procedural** knowledge (the ‘how’, techniques, skills and abilities), and **propositional** knowledge (‘that’, facts, concepts and propositions). However, what the literature often neglects are the attitudes or values that an employee brings to the workplace. That is, the employee makes the call as to whether they consider something is *worth doing*. Knowing how and knowing that do not add value to the workplace if there is a disinclination to ‘do’ (Kerka, 1997).

The nature of work in the ‘knowledge’ era is definitely different what we have traditionally known, and this creates new structures and processes including a growing recognition that an organisations wealth exists primarily in the skills and knowledge of its employees. Some workplace learning is achieved through planned programs of staff development and training (often called human resource development), yet the majority of literature focuses on self-directed learning in the workplace (Candy, 1991). Rather than this self-directed workplace learning being planned it would appear that most organisational learning occurs unintentionally

² The theory of constructivism rests on the idea that there is an innate human drive to make sense of the world

through interaction with other team members in a similar context (Matthews & Candy, 1999).

From an organisational perspective, with the reality of global, economic and political change and uncertainty, there are currently unpredictable, unforeseen and unexpected changes in both the public and private sectors (Timpson, 1998). Organisational learning has its roots in social learning theory. The notion of a learning organisation³ is described as a metaphor⁴ by White (2002), but there are many definitions in the literature. Here are two definitions by key writers about learning organisations:

“The essence of organisational learning is the organization’s ability to use the amazing mental capacity of all its members to create the kind of processes that will improve its own” (Dixon, 1994)

“Organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together” (Senge, 1994)

Because the nature of workplaces varies, employees may engage in a variety of distinct but related workplace learning activities. These include learning to operate within a tradition of workplace activities, learning from workplace practices (learning through watching others), and learning by practice (learning by having the opportunity to repeat the workplace activity). There is also learning through practice, that is, learning about specific workplace principles through specific actions (Fish and Twinn, 1997).

Monitoring and evaluating learning effectiveness

As we all know the goals of evaluation vary. Among other things evaluations should be designed to provide the answers to questions that help us to understand and explain why things have developed the way they have. So how do we monitor and evaluate the effectiveness and efficacy of workplace learning? Over the past several years there has been comment on the poor quality of monitoring and evaluation of performance and programs in New Zealand (Boston et al, 1996, Schick, 1996, Ryan, 2003, State Services Commission, 2004), which in part reflects the lack of an evaluative management culture within organisations (Ryan, 2003). The use of an evaluative management culture (Ryan, 2003) in workplace learning refers to an organisational culture whereby both policy and program managers in the development and implementation stages have an organisational evaluation strategy. However, evaluative management cultures about workplace learning and integrating evaluation into organisational culture are not well documented in the literature (Cousins et al, 2004.)

Transforming workplaces to learning organisations

The concept of learning organisations have emerged in recent years as new models of workplace learning have been articulated the integration of learning into workplace

³ The ‘term learning organisation’ has its origins in companies like Shell where Arie de Geus described learning as the only sustainable competitive advantage

⁴ *“The learning organisation is a metaphor, with its roots in the vision of, and the search for a strategy to promote individual self-development within a continuously self-transforming organisation”* (p2)

practices and processes (Marsick and Watkins, 1997). The idea of a learning organisation is based on models of organisational learning that have been in the literature for many years (e.g. Argyris and Schon, 1978, 1996, March and Olsen, 1976, Meyer, 1982). Many authors agree about what a learning organisation is, although models and concepts are operationalised differently. However the literature can be synthesised as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Characteristics of learning organisations

Learning organisations	Results
Create useful knowledge	Are better able to anticipate change
Disseminate knowledge effectively	Respond and adapt more quickly to change
Use this knowledge to improve organisational effectiveness	Perform better and survive longer than organisations without a learning culture

The basis of a learning organisation as shown in Table 2 assumes that knowledge, management and intellectual capital are tangible outcomes of learning organisations. So what does this mean for the workplace as a learning environment? It assumes learning by individuals, and subsequently, of the entire organisational system is the process that makes the creation of knowledge a meaningful product which makes the organisation perform better (Watkins and Callahan, 1998). But how does an organisation measure intellectual capital? Most literature uses the concept of adding return on knowledge assets to the return on financial assets, but today many of the assets people bring to an organisation are intangible because they are the result in the systems and products they create. So knowledge management can be described as the process for creating, managing and distributing the knowledge used in organisational learning. As Senge (1990) states *“The organisations that will truly excel in the future will be the organisations that discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organisation”*

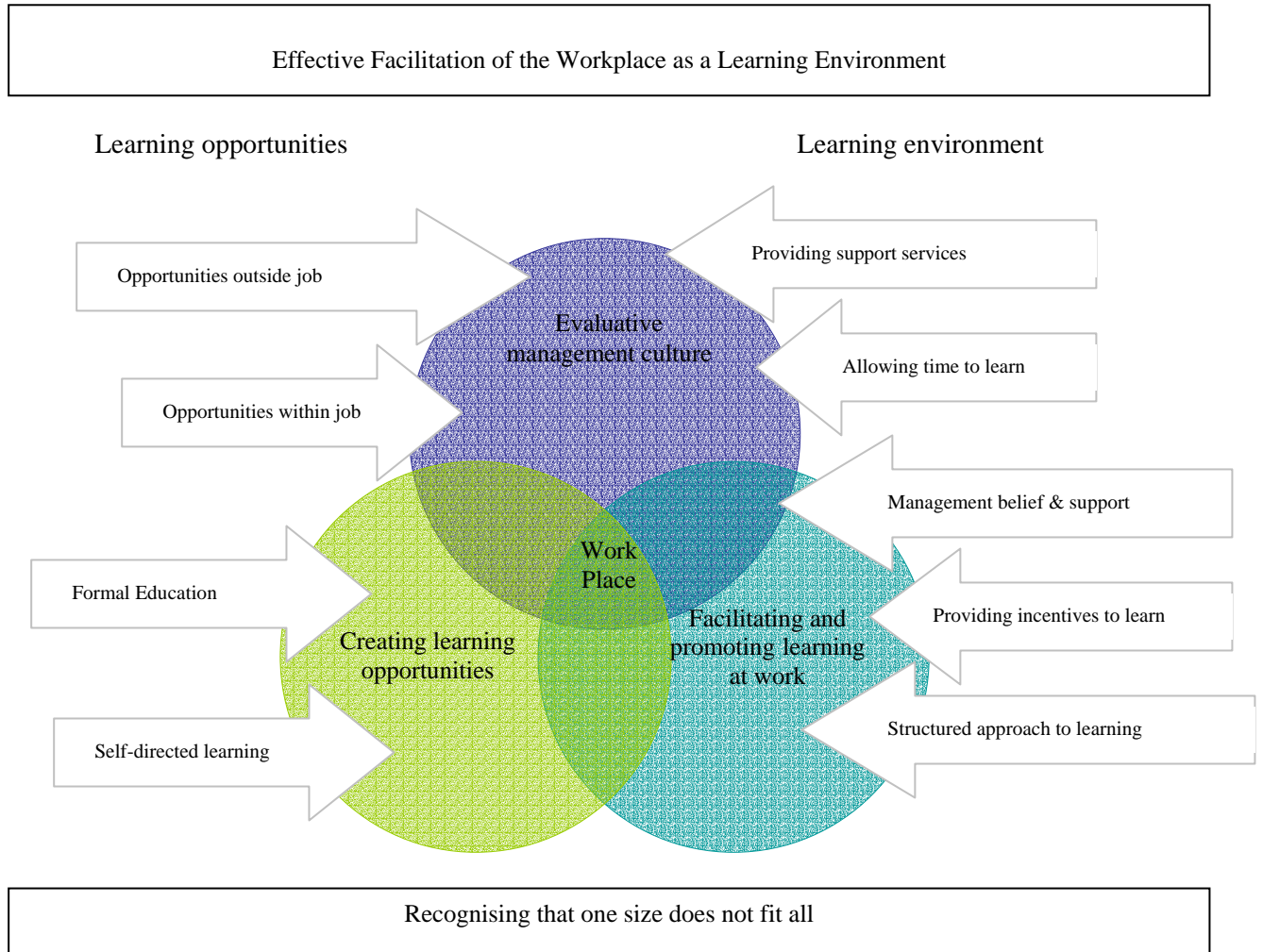
So what are the relationships between learning and work? Do we learn in order to work more effectively? Or do we learn through our work? I think the literature supports both points of view. That they can be understood as separate activities but in this age they are very rapidly converging (Barrett, 1999). But how is learning embedded in work? Does work always provide opportunities for growth and learning? Many workplaces and work practices are built on a set of routines. This is not necessarily referring to low-skill work, but also to professionals in monopoly situations in both the public and private sector. However, if learning is structurally embedded in work then is work also embedded in learning?

Effective learning in the workplace

The fundamental concept of effective learning in the workplace covers a wide spectrum of learning activities, but is primarily based on learning through experience. What every employee gains from workplace learning through experience *“depends on their motives and intentions, on what they know already and how they use their prior knowledge to effect conceptual change”* (Biggs, 1999, p13). A conceptual change means that rather than the employee acquiring more information or increasing knowledge about workplace practice, they are deepening their understanding and seeing workplace learning differently. Before considering what factors contribute to

effective learning in the workplace, it is important to define what constitutes effective learning. Effective learning flourishes in a *learning culture*⁵ where there is a “set of attitudes, values and practices within an organisation which support and encourage a process of learning for the organisation and/or its members”.

Figure 2: Conceptual framework for learning to work and working to learn



Effective facilitation of workplace learning focuses on three distinct variables: creating learning opportunities, facilitating and promoting learning at work, and an evaluative management culture. These three variables enable learning opportunities and the learning environment within the workplace to be identified.

CONCLUSION

Workplace learning is seeking to create a learning system which incorporates the needs of the industry, the organisation, the division and the individuals who work within the organisational culture. Understanding these relationships in the twenty-first century means they have to be placed against a background of wider societal and global shifts. And in part, the changing, challenging, unpredictable and uncertain workplace of today work has to become learning and

⁵ Johnston and Hawke (2002, in Dawe, 2003)

learning has to become work. We cannot escape the *global age* and the conditions and complexity that surround us (Allbrow, 1996). Work and learning are not synonymous. Rather, they are different concepts. All workplaces present real-world experiences from which information assimilation or experiential learning are possible. The ever increasing demands for skilled labour require people to enhance their skills throughout their lifetime, and the workplace is a relevant environment to undertake lifelong learning. However, as Hager (2004) reports “*contemporary work arrangements discourage learning, let alone life-long learning*” (p23). On the other hand there is evidence that organisations which encourage a learning culture, and include training and learning included in their strategic plan are more likely to have a workplace that improves performance (Smith et al, 2002). The common factors that literature identify as encouraging the workplace to be a learning environment include management belief in and support of learning, a structured approach to workplace learning, providing incentives to learn, providing support services, allowing time to learn and recognising that one size does not fit all.

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