Affordances and constraints on informal learning in the workplace: A sociocultural perspective

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Murdoch University 2008
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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ABSTRACT

In the last few decades, the workplace has been increasingly recognised as a legitimate environment for learning new skills and knowledge, which in turn enables workers to participate more effectively in ever-changing work environments. Within the workplace there is the potential for continuous learning to occur not only through formal learning initiatives that are associated with training, but also through informal learning opportunities that are embedded within everyday work activities. Somewhat surprisingly however, there have been relatively limited empirical investigations into the actual processes of informal learning in the workplace. This may in part be due to the particular methodological challenges of examining forms of learning that are not structured or organised but incidental to daily work activities. There remains, therefore, a clear need to better understand how learning occurs informally in the workplace, and most importantly, to gain insight into workers’ own accounts of informal learning experiences. This thesis addresses this issue by examining workers’ personal experiences of informal learning, and how these contributed to better participation in their regular workplace activities.

Four bodies of literature were reviewed as directly relevant to this research, adult learning, organisational learning, informal learning, and a sociocultural perspective on learning. Together, they provide complementary perspectives on the development of learning in the workplace. A conceptual framework, grounded in the sociocultural perspective, was developed to
address the issue of how informal learning leads to better participation in the workplace, and reciprocally, how better participation leads to continuous informal learning. Consistent with the sociocultural perspective, the workplace was conceptualised as a complex social system in which co-workers, who constitute that social system, are assumed to co-regulate each other’s learning opportunities. Social interactions, therefore, are considered as creating a context in which informal learning is afforded or constrained. Understanding what role workplace culture and socialisation play in affording or constraining informal learning opportunities is therefore crucial. This is because the relationships between co-workers is assumed to influence how both new and established co-workers participate in and experience the socialisation process and how they see their respective roles. The framework developed for the study generated two main research questions: How do co-workers learn informally in the workplace? and How does the workplace, as a social system, afford or constrain informal learning in the workplace?

The methodology chosen for this empirical study was consistent with key concepts from the sociocultural perspective, namely that individuals and their social context must be studied concurrently as learning is assumed to be part of a social practice where activities are structured by social, cultural and situational factors. Accordingly, qualitative research methods were employed to gain knowledge and understanding of informal learning in the workplace from the perspective of co-workers. Co-worker’s reflections on their informal learning experiences and participation in the workplace are
presented in narrative form and their accounts interpreted from the sociocultural theoretical perspective. The narrative format provides a useful way of presenting data in a way that immerses the reader in the phenomenon, with enough concrete details that the reader can identify with the subjective experiences of informal learning of each participant.

The study highlighted how the nature of some relationships between new and established co-workers afforded opportunities for informal learning, while other relationships constrained such opportunities. These afforded or constrained opportunities were by nature spontaneous, planned, intentional or unintentional. The study also revealed that personal and organisational factors co-contributed to creating these social affordances or constraints. Common across groups was the importance given to the quality of relationships between co-workers. The way new and established co-workers participated and interacted in the workplace was found to represent important sociocultural processes that impacted on the effectiveness of informal learning.

Overall, this study draws attention to the complexity of participation and interaction in the workplace. A major implication is that opportunities for informal learning are, potentially afforded or constrained by the social context. The study also highlighted conceptual and methodological issues in identifying and interpreting how co-workers learn informally in the workplace. Future research should establish how opportunities for effective informal learning might be fostered further through the design of more
enabling workplace practices. The significance of perceived and expected roles between new and established co-workers also deserves further empirical attention, at the level of everyday informal practices but also at the level of organisational processes and structures that provide the broader context.
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