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Chapter 2: The context of placement and work-based learning

Jim Hordern

Purpose of the chapter

After reading this chapter you should understand:

- how and why workplaces differ
- what these differences could mean for what and how you can learn
- some introductory concepts for analysing workplaces learning opportunities

Introduction

Whether you are going on placement or already in work you will find that the workplaces you work within will have a significant impact on how and what you learn. Learning within workplaces is shaped by a wide variety of factors, some of which are related to the organisation of which that workplace is a part and the work activities that organisation is concerned with. Other factors may include the interpersonal relations between colleagues and how work is managed within the workplace. What and how you learn within that workplace is also strongly related to your particular disposition to learning – what are you trying to get out of the experience? What action can you take to maximise your learning opportunities? In this chapter we explore some of these ideas and questions in order to support you in better understanding the nature of workplace learning. You will be provided with some conceptual tools that will help you think about your workplace experience and are encouraged to think critically about how that workplace operates and how it can be improved to support your ongoing professional development, and that of your colleagues / co-workers. Some illustrations are offered, primarily from English contexts

1. The context of learning at work: an overview

Work is generally considered to be purposeful activity, and yet the workplace is not simply a place where workers mechanically undertake tasks and fulfil obligations to meet particular objectives. Work can be social and highly political, with interpersonal relations, friendships and tensions adding a particular flavour to each workplace context. Colleagues may be members of well-functioning teams, or relatively isolated individuals focused on their own

specific tasks with little interest in what the person in the next room is doing. There may be clear notions of leadership and obvious individual leaders, or a distinct lack of collective direction. A particular workplace may be quite independent of any other workplace, or it may be part of a wider organisation of workplaces, which may be similar to or different from each other. More broadly, workplaces sit within particular legal, political, economic and societal contexts that shape what is considered to be acceptable and unacceptable activity at work. Employment conditions, management expectations, workplace rituals and routines may differ across organisations and societies (Rainbird et al. 2004). Equally, technological change may result in new workplace practices emerging, and require new ways of learning.

We may encounter a wide variety of workplaces in the study of Education, from schools, colleges, early years settings and voluntary sector providers. Each will have its own character, shaped in part the culture of the organisation of which it is a part. Handy (1993) usefully identifies how organisations can be ‘power’, ‘role’, ‘task’ and ‘person’ cultures, which define how their purpose and operations. A power culture emerges around strong leaders or ‘one man bands’ who have considerable control over operations of the organisation – this can often be found in small entrepreneurial organisations or pressure groups with charismatic leaders. Role cultures, on the other hand, are bureaucratic with defined rules and procedures which govern organisational life. They are often stable and resilient, but slow moving and resistant to change. Task cultures are usually problem-focused, often found in organisations developed for a particular project or to achieve a particular goal. Lastly, person cultures exist when organisations are developed to serve groups of individuals with common interests, often skilled professionals who do not wish to be bound by rules or strong individual leadership. While we might think of schools as more role orientated, there may also be power cultures at work in some small voluntary and private sector organisations, and strong beliefs in a person culture may also be important in some forms of higher education. However, any organisation is likely to be a mix of differing cultures, often in tension with each other and shaped by the wider environment of which they are a part.

Felstead et al. (2009) and Eraut and Hirsch (2007) identify how the broader systems in which workplaces are located influence the extent to which workers have discretion and control over their workplace tasks, factors which are particularly important for learning, and this may differ where certain cultures are prevalent. Where workers have greater discretion and control over their work they can adapt tasks and processes creatively, innovating and developing new forms of expertise. If workers have limited control and follow a closely

prescribed and monitored set of instructions (for example in what or how to teach) then innovation is taken out of their hands and they have less incentive to be independently innovative and creative – they are less likely to feel they own their own work. The nature of management is crucial here in supporting learning. In certain organisational cultures, managers and leaders may be better at ‘facilitating’ workplace learning, while others may seek to ‘control’ and specify what is learnt, and how this happens (Felstead et al. 2009; Eraut and Hirsch 2007).

School organisations are often thought of as bureaucratic, but may also be driven by inspirational leaders, or, networks. Schooling reform in England recently has resulted in many local schools becoming academies, sometimes as part of larger independent organisations often led by high profile sponsors. Academy schools have governance and management structures which remove the obligation to co-operate with other schools in the local authority area. The managers and headteachers in academy schools have considerable flexibility in the organisation of their workplaces, the terms and conditions of their teaching staff, and in how pupils are taught (NUT 2012). This contrasts with local authority, community or comprehensive schools, where working conditions and processes have often been agreed at a local authority level or as part of a broader agreement. Arguably, the flexibility on offer in an academy could result in teaching staff having considerable discretion and control over their work, but the opposite may also be the case if the management of a particular academy chain or a headteacher decides to prescribe a particularly way of working or ‘educational formula’ that must be followed by all within the school. The ‘audit culture’ promoted by school inspection regimes may also reduce the scope for teachers to work in the ways that they might wish. The ability of teachers to improve the quality of pedagogy and classroom interaction has been identified as vital for improvements in educational outcomes (Husbands 2013), but this may be compromised if teachers have limited control over their work.

Early years settings are usually considerably smaller than schools, and workplaces can often seem less routinized and work less structured. This could offer early years workers greater control over their work and opportunity to put new ideas into practice. In England, however, curriculum reforms and the ongoing challenges of inspection may constrain practitioner autonomy. Early years provision is fragmented in England, with greater private and voluntary sector provision than is the norm in many other European countries (Penn 2014). This diversity of provision may encourage a greater range of practice within early years

workplaces, so that particular settings can pursue their own vision of good quality early years education and care. On the other hand, it may also result in some poor quality practice emerging locally, and in forms of management that are not supportive of the professional development of practitioners (Hordern 2013). The potential for government policy and statutory frameworks to shape workplace culture is matched by the scope for pioneering private individuals to develop their own early years provision and shape workplace practices in ways that they think are important. Indeed, it could be argued that pioneering individuals have been particularly powerful in influencing early years educational traditions (Nutbrown and Clough 2014).

You may also be working or undertaking your placement in a voluntary or community based organisation, and here the diversity of workplace context may be considerable. Some workplaces have very clear roles and responsibilities set out in job descriptions and organisational charts, while others operate a more fluid approach where employees and volunteers may be generally expected to contribute to each and any activity, depending on their capabilities and availability. Arguably, there is greater scope for fast-moving radical change in workplace culture in less bureaucratic organisations, and this may lead to greater uncertainty about the future.

Activity 1

- Does the organisation you are working in have clear roles and responsibilities for its employees? Can you find Job Descriptions and an Organisational Chart? What do these tell you about the culture of the organisation and what it expects of its employees?
- How is professional development supported in your place of work? Is there a professional development policy? To what extent do workers have discretion and control over their own professional practice and development?
- Have your colleagues worked in many different educational organisations? How have the workplace cultures differed?

2. The importance of participation

Billett highlights the importance of ‘participatory practices’, which can be described as involving both ‘close personal interactions’ and ‘engagement in the physical and social

environment that constitutes the workplace' (2004, 113). This is learning as participation, recognising the insights of the community of practice tradition (Lave and Wenger 1991) and the importance of the 'social world' for 'knowledge construction' (Billett 2004, 112-3) as emphasised by Vygotskian theorists. Certain forms of participation are particularly beneficial for workers depending on their level of expertise. Thus 'opportunities to observe' or 'secure direct guidance through...interactions between experts and novices' may help to make 'concepts and practices accessible' (ibid. 114). These opportunities and interactions may be consciously shaped into a 'workplace curriculum' involving 'pathways of activities that are often inherently pedagogical' (ibid., 119). This can serve the purpose of supporting novice practitioners gain workplace expertise that builds on education they have received in institutions, and may also make use of the experiences they have gained in other workplaces. Some managers and senior leaders in schools and early years settings may structure the workplace activities of novice practitioners so that they can engage in a workplace curriculum, inducting them into workplace practices through participative opportunities and interaction with experts. However, organisational constraints and workplace pressures may undermine best efforts to offer learning opportunities, either pushing new practitioners into taking on responsibilities too early or restricting their participation if there is limited time to support them gain expertise.

It is important to recognise that we may or may not be aware of how or what we are learning. In other words there can be both 'explicit' and 'tacit' dimensions to learning, knowledge and expertise (Winch 2010; Eraut and Hirsch 2007). The culture of an organisation and the mode of practice we are engaged in may lead us to work in particular ways. We may thus 'tacitly' (without necessarily realising it) take on behaviours, attitudes and techniques that are part of the practice we are engaged in. Those practitioners who have only worked in one educational setting or institution may thus assume that the practice common in their setting or institution is shared more widely than it is. If they take on a role in a setting or institution where very different workplace practices are common it may take them some time to adjust. Workplace learning can also be more 'explicit', with opportunities for colleagues to learn from others through collaborative tasks, problem-solving and mentoring and coaching (Eraut and Hirsch 2007, 25-27). In such situations managers, supervisors and practitioners may identify the learning purpose of the activity and seek to document what has been learnt over time.

For those readers on placement it is also worth considering the extent to which your temporary stay in the workplace offers you some advantages and disadvantages in

comparison with employed colleagues. In some workplaces it may be easier for those on placement to become part of the team – other team members may value your more independent input to work activity. They may recognise that you bring fresh ideas and welcome you as a participant, remembering also that you may perhaps become a future colleague following your studies. Your participation is seen as fully ‘legitimate’ – you are seen as a practitioner who is allowed, or entitled, to participate (Lave and Wenger 1991). On the other hand, being on placement may also limit the extent to which you can contribute – your participation may be seen as legitimate only in certain circumstances. There may be certain activities which are ‘off limits’ and not suitable for you as a novice practitioner. In part, the extent of this legitimation may also relate to how much confidence your colleagues have in you – if you can demonstrate your capabilities in the workplace then you may be more likely to be offered further participative opportunities. Greater discretion and control over your work may be available as you show you are a competent practitioner.

Activity 2: think about the following questions

- In your workplace are there opportunities to participate in a wide range of work activities, and to discuss key concepts with more expert practitioners.
- In which activities are you a ‘legitimate’ participant?

3: A key model: the expansive-restrictive framework

To help you to identify the character of the workplace you are working in and the potential it offers for learning, we will now explore an adapted version of the ‘expansive-restrictive’ framework developed by Fuller and Unwin (2004) to analyse learning at work. This framework is useful as it outlines a series of factors that can be identified within workplaces, and points to strategies that could be employed to improve workplace learning for employees. The more ‘expansive’ factors indicate opportunities for higher quality learning, while the more ‘restrictive’ factors suggest that workplace learning is more limited and problematic. Only eight pairs of factors are considered here (please see the table below), while the original framework contains twenty.

(Table 1 about here)

A number of elements of the framework should be emphasised for educational workplaces. Firstly, participating in learning beyond the immediate workplace is important. This may be through involvement in activities with other practitioners in other schools or settings, or perhaps through regional, national or international forums. Equally, the contributions of all colleagues need to be valued, but these colleagues need to be working in a culture that encourages them to work in teams rather than focus only on their specialist roles. This can be difficult if educational organisations are used to operating with staff with highly defined roles and when certain types of expertise are needed. Time away from work for study and professional development is vital for consolidating learning – schools in England hold INSET days for staff development, but there have been questions about whether these are used effectively (Bubb and Earley 2013).

Activity 3: Comparing workplaces and questions to think about

- Use the expansive-restrictive framework to compare two or more organisations you have worked within or have knowledge of. Which aspects of ‘expansiveness’ does it seem most difficult to achieve? What stops organisations offering more expansive opportunities to their employees?
- Are all staff contributions recognised and valued in your workplace?
- Do managers facilitate or control individual development?
- How much time off the job do staff have for their development?

4: What can we learn from our experience of work?

The focus on context should not allow us to neglect the importance of individual ‘dispositions’ or attitudes to learning. What you learn from your workplace experience is, to a certain extent, up to you. Opportunities can be made available, but if individuals are not prepared to make best use of them, then learning is unlikely to occur. Billett discusses how ‘personal histories’ and ‘individual agency’ can affect which activities are ‘judged worthy of participation’ (2004, 117), with colleagues deciding to engage with those activities which they perceive as beneficial. There can be ‘tension...between the goals of the social practice and those of the individual’ (ibid.) in many workplaces if individual members of staff expect opportunities to be available which are not, or if individuals are unable to bring their particular motivations and interests into the activity. In educational organisations there may

be considerable differences between the objectives of the organisation and the motivations and interests of staff. Conceptions of the purpose of education are contested, and many current educational initiatives and policies are controversial – the implementation of reform may be perceived as constraining or undermining the interests and values of staff. Although these constraints may seem unsurmountable, there is good reason to think that experienced staff will find ways of working around unpopular reforms to continue to offer the best they can to children and young people. In such cases staff may have to innovate to uphold their values.

For those on placement, there are always opportunities to learn, whatever constraints exist. If opportunities do not obviously present themselves, you may need to use your ‘individual agency’ to find or create them. It is useful to see the placement as a chance not only to get actively involved in the work of the organisation hosting you, but also to observe how the political and social context shapes the workplace and the learning of your colleagues.

Activity 4

- what is your disposition to learning? How does your personal history shape what you consider to be important to learn and how you react to opportunities? How does this differ from those around you?
- What can you do to maximise your learning on placement / in your workplace. List some actions you can take to improve your use of learning opportunities. Discuss these actions with colleagues, asking them for further ideas.

Conclusion

In this chapter you have been introduced to some concepts that underpin how we think about the context of workplace learning that are relevant to those on education studies programmes. The context of workplace learning is shaped by political, social, economic and technological factors and relates both to the culture of an organisation and to how work is organised and managed. It has been argued that forms of participation in workplace activities, supported by an ‘expansive’ learning environment, are vital for productive learning at work. While it can seem difficult to learn at work in certain contexts, individual agency and motivation are key factors enabling learning to take place.

Follow-up activity

- Meet with others on your course to compare the environments of the workplaces you have been working in. What are the similarities and differences in term of context and opportunities to learn? What features of expansiveness and restrictiveness are common across workplaces? When was it possible to participate, and when were there constraints? What actions did they take to get the most out of their placement / work environment?

Further reading

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