

Learning in the Workplace

Strategies for effective practice

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Stephen Billett, the author of "Learning in the Workplace-Strategies for effective practice" critiques some assumptions shaping current discourses on workplace learning and proposes that these assumptions restrict how workplace learning is conceptualized and discussed. In particular, he focuses on how describing workplace learning environments and experiences as 'informal' and that 'informal learning' occurs in workplaces constrains understanding about how learning occurs through work and, consequently, the development of a workplace pedagogy. In this book the author argues that workplace activities are structured by historical, cultural and situational factors and these factors influence the kind and quality of learning that occurs through work. As with educational institutions, there are intentions for work practice, structured goal-directed activities that are central to its continuity, and interactions and judgments about performance that are shaped to those ends. These practices determine the kinds of activities individuals participate in and the guidance they access in workplaces from which they learn. Therefore, describing learning through work as being 'informal' is incorrect. Instead, the structuring of workplace activities has dimensions associated with learning for sustaining practice which are inherently pedagogical. Moreover, the unqualified description of learning in workplaces as being either 'formal' or 'informal' suggests a situational determinism that de-emphasizes the role of human agency in the constructive processes of thinking-acting-learning. Learning is proposed as being

interdependent rather than situationally deterministic.

To further understand how learning through work occurs and it can be best organized, necessitates a critique of some assumptions in the current workplace learning discourse. A proposition advanced here is that workplaces and educational institutions merely represent different instances of social practices in which learning occurs through participation. It is equally important to account for how individuals elect to engage with work activities and access the support and guidance that workplaces affords them. Ultimately, individuals determine what constitutes their invitational qualities. Hence, workplace practices such as those shaping individuals' participation and how they elect to engage in workplace activities become central to understanding learning at work and the construction of the knowledge required for work. It is these relations that are central to the social basis of knowing.

It is worth concluding by a consideration of the importance that studies of learning in workplaces can make to understanding human cognition and development. A focus on practice, participation and engagement in social practice and continuity as ontogeny and changing social practice offers alternative bases for considering both cognition and pedagogy unencumbered from assumptions about direct relations between teaching and learning. Perhaps the most central concern in contemporary

discussions about cognition is the focus on the enduring problem of relations between individuals and the social world. So the conceptual significance of examining participation at work can be seen as illuminating relations between the social world and the mind at intersections between the trajectories of the transforming social practice of the workplace and individuals' evolving ontogenies as they engage in work. Rather than proposing the mind as either individual or social, it can be conceptualized in a complex of relations between the two. Here, the relations are seen in terms of participatory practices or engagement founded in intersections between the ontogeny (which is socially derived) and the social practice, and in associations between the continuity or sustaining the two. Workplace practices and affordances, like those in other kinds of settings, are dynamic, as their tasks, goals, interactions, participants and relations are likely to be constantly changing.

Five key premises are proposed in presenting a case for pedagogy for the workplace and a workplace curriculum.

First, Learning is taken as something that occurs as part of everyday thinking and acting. It is not reserved for the classroom or the training room; it is ongoing in our everyday experiences.

Second, rather than being premised on the instructional and curriculum practices of educational institutions, a workplace curriculum needs to be founded on the contributions and circumstances afforded by the workplace environment. Within the book, assumptions about relationships between teaching and learning are questioned and distinctions drawn between experiences in classrooms and those in workplaces.

Third it is inadequate to believe that learning simply

by 'just doing it' will suffice. There are clear limitations to learning in workplaces as part of everyday work. There are also consequences for individuals' learning when access to sources of understanding and guidance is limited or simply unavailable. Skilled workers have to respond to new tasks in the workplace and transfer their vocational practice to other situations. Consequently the workplace learning experiences need to be structured to develop this capacity in workers.

Fourth, workplaces are contested terrain. This contestation manifests itself in relationships between workers and management, within and between work teams, in the division of labour and among affiliated groups in the workplace. There are also divisions premised on gender, age, affiliation, bases for employment and ethnicity.

Finally, the ideas in this book are not meant to deny the important contribution to the development of vocational knowledge provided by educational institutions. Perhaps the most desirable form of initial preparation for the vocations and their further development is through the kinds of integrated experiences enjoyed by apprentices.

The principal audience for this book comprises those who are interested in learning in and for the workplace. This includes those working in human resource development roles, those who are interested in facilitating workplace learning and those whose tertiary studies or research interests are directed towards learning as part of work.

Learning in the workplace has come of age with the publication of this book. It shows the way for a new level of sophistication in the ways learning and work are treated. And it opens new territory for exploration in the world of learning throughout life.