Tidying the Territory: Clarifying our Terms and Purposes in Integrating Learning and Work
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Certain conceptual elisions in work/learning scholarship, slippages that finesse central and significant distinctions, have become troubling. Without better conceptual clarity, researchers claiming to examine "learning" and its relationships with various contexts of work may be studying phenomena wholly different in kind, and generating more mutual confusion than enrichment. The notion of learning, for example, has been equated in different studies to both processes and outcomes of knowledge creation, to change of any magnitude in organizations and individuals, to social and material practices, and to human existence itself. We might well ask, given a contemporary tendency to collapse most experience into a notion of ‘learning’, what then is not learning?

Similarly, references to “work” evident in research linking work and learning are expanding to embrace diverse forms of conscious and unconscious activity, paid or unpaid, organized or not, in social and economic spheres. The term “workplace” may designate a small business or large corporation, a high-tech project-based firm or a manufacturing plant. While contextual distinctions are well-recognized in organizational literature and typically noted in work-learning studies, the conclusions generated about work and learning tend to refer to a generic “workplace” to which theories of work and learning apply.

Our conceptual blurrings inevitably challenge us to defend our assumption that this constructed category of "work" learning is really significant, epistemologically. In what ways are our studies of learning and people in work really distinct from any studies of learning, in family, community or classroom? How can we justify a field of learning studies focused on one particular context, and why a context called ‘work’? What disciplinary linkages might we be missing in exploring dimensions of human learning such as subjectivity, space/time configurations, psychic experience, and curriculum if we foreground the construct of work?

These blurrings may conceal or at least muffle the sharp ideological differences marking our positionalities. Some, like Bruce Spencer (2001), use terms like ‘educative purposes’ rather than ‘learning’ in work, afraid that their projects for workers’ rights and more democratic organization of work might be collapsed with a-political views of meaning making, human development, and circulating practices.

Conceptual pluralism and a struggle for language are a mark of any emerging field, which work-learning research arguably is. I do not argue for a totalizing map of our concepts, but for more dialogue about exactly what we mean when we refer to work, or learning, or workplace – or worker, for that matter. The reason is not just a desire for more conceptual clarity. Different purposes arise from different definitional/ideological bases embedded in our language, and mobilize very different analyses and findings in studies all purporting to explore work/learning processes. Without greater precision in our meanings and orientations as we talk across common terms and constructs, research purposes are often left opaque. Without problematizing the issues involved in our various usages and meanings, we may draw assumptions of transparency and
agreement over what are deeply contested ideas. We also risk submitting the crowded space of public rhetoric on work and learning to the control of strategic language machines employed deliberately by certain groups to shape public perceptions for their own purposes.

The following sections develop these arguments, drawing from early results of a meta-literature review of work-learning literature published 1999-2004.

What counts as “work” in considerations of learning? What is a “workplace”?

To begin with context, the terms work, worker, and workplace are often employed as if their meanings are transparent and uncontested. Edward and Nicolls (2004) claim that work-learning literature is frequently characterized by loose references to an all-encompassing workplace, as though we can talk of learning in similar ways whether we are referring to small or large, private or public, unionized or non-unionized, profit or non-profit, collective or solo sites of work. Worker can refer without distinction to entrepreneurs, managers and employees, in-scope and out-of-scope supervisors, professionals and clerical staff, factory line workers, contingent workers and farmers.

Workplace is problematic, of course, for implying correspondence between a set of activities called work with any specific site or place. In this age of flexible work, many individuals work across multiple sites. Many papers at this conference have pointed out how precarious these sites are, and typically associated with an organizing center upon which a worker is dependent and far-flung. Even for those who identify their work with a single stable site, work activities typically leak out of that site to the car, the roving cell phone, the dining room table, even in bed at night sleeplessly wrestling with work dilemmas. The linguistic omission of homeplace, to which Patti Gouthro (2000) draws our attention as a significant site of work, foregrounds the public/private split embedded in terms like workplace. Place itself is a fluid and conflicted notion, defying the conventional frames of fixed Cartesian space. Cultural geographers (i.e. Thrift & Pile, 1995) have shown how meanings of place embrace not only geographic coordinates but also emotional sense of belonging, discursive spaces, imaginative and virtual landscapes, as well as political divisions and cultural distributions. Czarniawska (2004) interrupts the chronological sense of time constructing most notions of workplace, showing that ‘kairotic’ and other organizations of time (recurrent, teleological, digressive) are more prominent influences on work activities and knowledge creation.

The question of scale becomes relevant too. When conceptions of workplace are confined to, say, a particular organization, what is left aside are the larger systems of relations constructing

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1 All articles containing the terms “work” and “learning” were selected in issues of the following journals published between 1999 and 2004 inclusive: *Journal of Workplace Learning, Studies in Continuing Education, International Journal of Lifelong Education, Management Learning, Organization, Organization Studies, Labor Studies International, Human Resource Development International, and Journal of Innovation Studies*. The year 1999 was chosen as a significant first international gathering of researchers in diverse disciplines sharing a common field of ‘researching work and learning’, at University of Leeds.
and locating that organization within the market economy, and with respect to the state and even to civil society. This becomes particularly relevant when issues are opened about paid and unpaid work, for example. These do not exist as a clear binary. Unpaid work can be part of the informal economy of volunteerism or domestic work. But unpaid work also exists in leakages of daily work activity to non-billable overtime work, or emotional labour and relational labour that is tacitly demanded by not necessarily recognized or compensated.

The scope of activity that is becoming associated with the term ‘work’ should also give us critical pause. On one hand, to focus on work is to automatically exclude vast groups of people who may be considered non-workers: retired people, young people, homemakers, volunteers, non-employed people. On the other hand, over-expansion leads to other problems. At international conferences on researching work and learning, contexts for study now include community groups, family, professional and personal learning gatherings, volunteer work, the work of dying and struggling with illness, and youth activities as well as the more conventional work contexts of private and public sector employment relations. Anything that is learning, one could argue, is doing and thinking. And what doing and thinking is not work? Where are the spaces that are free from work? If we are not careful our very studies, in an effort to be inclusive, may contribute to the steady collapsing of most human activity and lifelong learning into the expanding economic domain.

The blurrings of work activity and learning activity became acute for me in a research study of informal learning unfolding in immigrant service organizations. We were exploring learning occurring in volunteers’ work, in work conducted as learning projects for clients served by the volunteers, in friendships, in negotiations of insider/outsider status, and in emerging shared notions in the whole organization about its identity and solidarity conflicts. What were we studying, beside life itself with/in this working volunteer organization dedicated to learning? I began to wonder whether the term ‘work’ that we wielded applied at all, and if so, how it carved and shadowed the complex nets of talk and activity and our own intrusion into them.

A question for our dialogue most obviously might be, just what is work? But a more critical question may be, what political issues are involved when we privilege the term work? As Edwards and Nicoll (2004) point out, we should wonder why the workplace is mobilized as a pivotal symbol of the economic health of nations, and a critical site for translating interests of states, organizations and individuals into realizable goals of economic competitiveness and social inclusion.

What is “learning” in work?

The term learning is used, often without definition or qualification, to refer to skill development, information access, personal transformation, and consciousness-raising among individuals. The same term is employed to describe system processes such as innovation, idea sharing, knowledge management and organizational change. Some analysts have attempted to articulate relations between individual and ‘organizational learning’ (Crossan, Lane & White, 1999) while many simply identify their context of analysis (project team, organization, network of organizations, individuals) and proceed to discuss its ‘learning’. Workplace learning literature now appears to
embrace professional development and managers’ learning alongside workers’ learning, without analyzing the relations and influences among these.

**Learning is knowledge is product (with a process)**

Perhaps a central confusion, as Karl Weick and Westley (1996) pointed out, is the common tendency to refer to learning as both product and process. Some clarify their intent to examine product by calling it ‘learning outcome’, but many simply use learning to mean both knowledge-creating actions as well as new knowledge. Some collapse the knowledge-creating system with the knowledge that is created by invoking the term learning. Paul Hager (2004) argued that the common-sense view of learning is in fact product-oriented: most people think of learning, particularly related to work, as acquisition of new skills. Thus, concludes Hager, there is need for researchers to understand his view that learning is an ongoing condition of practice-based process, and to educate those stuck in traditional views of learning as the finished result of ingesting knowledge.

But in fact, many researchers continue to refer to learning as an outcome of a process. Working from this metaphor, Argyris (2003) maintains that learning is either effective or ineffective (or even incorrect). Engestrom (1999, 2001, 2004), who uses ‘learning’ to mean all sorts of things, in one article talks of learning as not only the formation of collective routines, but also tool-creation. Knowledge management literature, which is abundant in articles about work and learning in high-ranking journals like Organization Studies and Administrative Science Quarterly as well as in Journal of Workplace Learning, also focuses on learning as outcome. In these articles learning describes knowledge that has been created and captured (e.g. Macpherson et al., 2003). The term ‘knowledge’ itself can be slippery, but in these contexts it appears most often to mean ‘innovation’, and in fact the two terms are frequently synonymous. A debate occupying organizational learning literature in the past five years has centered on the relation of innovation to ‘exploitation’, or the diffusion and implementation of innovation throughout the organization. Both phenomena are described as different kinds of knowledge processes (Brown & Duguid, 2002), using one term: learning.

Those who focus on individuals as their unit of analysis similarly write about acquisition: of behaviors (Burrow & Burrardinelli, 2003), of ‘new’ concepts (Beers et al., 2003), of know-how or ‘tacit mastery’ (Morris & Beckett, 2004). As Frank Coffield (1999) shows, from the dominant human capital perspective, the learning product is often assumes to be intellectual resources located in human individuals: the question focuses on who owns these resources. This question becomes a central preoccupation in much critical literature. In one lengthy discussion to reposition organizational learning and the learning worker for social democracy, for example, Catherine Casey (2003) never clarifies just what she means by learning, though she draws critically upon traditions holding conflicting assumptions about learning.

The link of individual to group learning tends most often to be described as ‘sharing’ knowledge (Bogenrieder & Nooteboo, 2004, Lehesvirta, 2004). This sharing process is described most frequently as talking, as ‘information exchange’ (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2002), or more simply, as ‘accessing information’ (Lahn, 2004). Thus in these conflations, learning = knowledge which = information, where information is something useful that can be created, used, exchanged and
stored. Few questions are raised about what is recognized as new, what proves to be useful, what is foregrounded as a solution, what is routine, or from what vantage point (spatially and temporally) all of these judgments are made. Most critical, in few of these writings is the meaning and scope of the term learning as employed by the author(s) ever made explicit.

**Learning is process**

Writers that distance themselves from the ‘learning is knowledge is product’ view tend to be more explicit about their definition of learning. Consider these examples:

- Learning is individuals’ pragmatic *use* of knowledge in workplace (Moore, 2004)
- Learning is individual *experiences* of induction and identity formation (Bryan & Mavins, 2003)
- Learning is *developing* solutions (Sense, 2004)
- Learning is negotiations of social identity (Llewellyn, 2004)

While explicit, these definitions indicate what are arguably very different conceptualizations, that could conceivably link to enrich one another. The process of ‘using’ knowledge, for example, arguably affects one’s negotiation of identity, and both are likely involved in different ways in the process of creating solutions. But to examine the experience of identity formation is to focus on something different than the negotiation of identity: the latter implies an emergent, possibly collective, dynamic with emphasis on examining the process of creating; the former implies focus on individual meanings of a predictable developmental and teleological process.

Even among those focusing on the collective, many describe learning in terms of process, where outcome is something different. In labour studies, for example, learning often refers to worker centered activity, where workers teach other workers about rights, conditions, structures and leadership. The outcomes are solidarity and workplace change benefiting workers, not learning (Spencer, 2002; Taylor 2001).

In so-called practice-based studies, often drawing from Wenger’s (1998) notion of communities of practice, learning is conflated with ongoing practice itself: joint activity in a community of shared purposes, tools and history (Elmholdt, 2004; Bloomer, Hodkinson, Billett, 2004; Sawchuk, 2003; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003; Gherardi, 2002). Practices are described as knowledge-circulation, and learning becomes the directionless web of political micro-interactions socializing the goings-on of workers and their tools (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000). For some the outcomes have to do with an individual becoming a fuller participant in practice, while others strive for an outcome of changed or ‘reconfigured’ practices. For a large UK research conglomerate marking out this territory, learning is ‘practising’ in organizational ‘practices’, such that ‘practice’ is reified and no process beyond observable participation is included in learning (Antonacopoulou, 2004).

In its broadest terms, the learning-as-process view embraces all meaning-making. As Stephen Billett (2000) writes, “If we are thinking and acting we are learning”. Learning is “continuous active improvisation” (Tikkanen, 2002), or “continuous collective construction of a social reality” (*Samra-Fredericks*, 2003). Part of this expansion has resulted through the old adult education binary of formal/informal learning, the problems of which Billett (2002) explains
effectively. When we accept informal learning to be all conscious experience and sense-making, individual and collective, we have a difficult time explaining just what is not learning. Billett opens some of these issues. Kathryn Church and her research team (2001) open others. They explain that while a large national study defines informal learning as “a discrete learning experience that can be consciously identified as significant by the learner and retrospectively recognized both in the form of knowledge and the process of acquisition” (Livingstone, 1998), their team prefers to define it as “complex and contradictory, inductive and dialectical” including “recognitions that critique the status quo as well as recognitions that reproduce the status quo” (p.244). These fine distinctions are significant: the capacity to apprehend phenomena comprising learning depends on them. So does the debate about which phenomena, finally, deserve priority.

These dialogues about language are important steps in drawing attention to fundamental ideological and purposive differences in work-learning studies, differences that, when named and amplified, can help spark questions and make connections to strengthen the theoretical posts holding up this complex net of work and learning.

**Issues in confusing the construct**

So in much workplace learning literature, learning can mean innovation, routine, a knowledge-creating system (of people, tools and activity), and individual expertise. At the core of these various ‘product’-centered views are very different objects of inquiry: a new idea is fundamentally different than an everyday institutional routine or one person’s repertoire of strategy and forecasting. These views are even less compatible with learning-as-process views that refer to any number of disparate performances as learning: everyday improvisations, ongoing adaptation, processes of change, negotiations of identity, ongoing ‘practices’, or simply thinking, acting and being.

Clearly many different theoretical orientations are visible in these discussions of workplace learning, as we would expect in a healthy field of scholarly debate. Particularly in the mesh of disciplines that have found their way to work/learning research, psychologists find themselves sharing the table with anthropologists, sociologists and educationists. At the intersections of these theoretical differences are born important conversations about how the learning process itself is envisaged, what elements and relations should be considered in understanding this process, what purposes learning should be linked with, and what actions if any should be taken – and by whom - to promote learning. Overall these debates are vital for enriching our notions of process, purpose and (pedagogical) practice. Some have tried to sort out these debates and draw attention to the current linguistic confusion. Boud and Middleton (2003), for example, state that while learning is developing new ways of thinking or acting, there are different “types” of learning. Ellstrom (2001) offers a typology of learning distinguishing adaptive from “generative” (innovative) and transformative learning; Illeris (2004) creates a map attempting to capture different learning directions, levels, processes, outcomes and constituents.

But there is a central problem when different analysts of process, say, are focusing on what may be fundamentally different phenomena. What would we think if, say, among researchers all purporting to study the process of breast cancer, some were actually examining overall changes in women’s health per se, some their everyday health practices, some the differences in breast
size, and some the emotional effects of doctor-patient relations? Eventually all of these issues should be connected to avoid reductionism and mistaking parts for the whole. But for scholars attempting to share and build on each other’s findings about the cancer’s actual process, shouldn’t there be some agreement about what object is meant by the term ‘breast cancer’? A linguistic map that expands the term to refer to phenomena ranging from social relations to cell reactions to personal behaviors may be a first step in delineating different issues or even different fields of study that are emerging. But such a map is only a step, not a final edifice. Its ultimate use might be to assist an overstretched and perhaps repressive term to blow apart so that new understandings may emerge with new language.

Learning of course, as a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon involving cognitive, social, cultural, political and biological dimensions, may be different in kind from cancer (although complexity scientists would argue that both of these phenomena are emergent and distributed). But if we do not even problematize the various meanings and their embedded assumptions that are currently circulating when workplace theorists refer to ‘learning’, we miss the chance to open these debates about the very object of our inquiry. Perhaps we will find that our different meanings of ‘learning’ can be understood as different types or forms or levels of learning. Or maybe we will find that we all are talking about the same sort of outcomes, with fundamental and irreconcilable conflicts in our views of what is involved in the emergence of those outcomes. But I think we will find that we are witnessing very different phenomena occurring in organizations that we have conflated under the by-now soggy label of ‘learning’.

When we disentangle and more precisely name what each of us thinks we are exploring, we are more able to articulate distinctions and relations and absences, and debate our ideological readings of these distinctions. In doing so, we might also problematize the over-riding assumption in most of this literature that learning is inherently a good thing. Edwards and Usher (2000) have shown how learning leads to dis/locations as much as to self-determination. Indeed it is commonly recognized that learning can move in unsavoury, even illegal directions. David Boud and Nicky Solomon (2003) point out that learning and the identity of learner retain notions of deficit or ‘still-developing’, which fundamentally contradicts the expectations for competence associated with the identity of worker. In problematizing learning, we might indeed question our own attractions to and identifications with learning as a focus for our studies.

**Concluding remarks**

I have been arguing that terms and concepts commonly used in work-learning scholarship mean different things in different studies. Further, I acknowledge that this sort of pluralism is inevitable in an emerging field, and fruitful in developing the field and enriching its bases. My intention is not simply to exploit an opportunity to point out the obvious, but to suggest that work-learning researchers might pause in our rush to trace and explain the processes of work and learning to compare and critically reflect on the language negotiations we are or should be undertaking. What contradictions, what ellisions, what continuities are emerging? What finer distinctions or alliances are not being recognized, or acknowledged explicitly? What core constructs, if any, can be agreed upon among work-learning researchers? And what politics are afoot as we negotiate our terms of reference?
Such questions may lead us to inventing, or at least refining, language we use to describe what we are doing. This is not simply a naming game, but may lead us to explore deeper issues undergirding and perhaps differentiating our studies. They also compel us to clarify to one another our political purposes for studying learning in work, which currently range from increasing employability or productivity to promoting economic democracy or enhancing individuals' well-being in work. Through these clarifications we might also broach the larger question, why are we focusing on the workplace? Which of our questions rely upon contexts of work as distinct from other contexts of social relations, knowledge politics, negotiations of subjectivity, learning? What key ideas hold together this field of work-learning studies, and on what central issues is it focused? Currently, the big ideas and the big research questions are being named from within very different understandings of learning. Some delineate the big question as articulating the link between individual and collective learning. Others dismiss this binary as non-existent and gather around micro-politics of knowledge and identity negotiations. Still others dismiss these issues as irrelevant and focus on how to create and adopt innovation across organizations, or on how to develop skills.

Finally, turning to the research communities that touch or shape the work-learning field, our internal conceptual clarification can help us understand borders and relations among each other’s fields: management/organization studies, innovation and technology studies, adult education, sociology of work, learning disciplines, career development, human resource development, and labour studies. New observations may grow from such an examination – we may find ways to loosen or strengthen the connective threads among various parts of this whole. We may also find a way to justify studies of learning in work, as a legitimate field with distinct purposes and conceptual bases. Again, I am not advocating that we develop some sort of massive classification, a typology or model to capture and pin all the loose bits rattling around our literature, though some have certainly tried to do this by imposing one particular orientation (Illeris, 2004; 2003). Rather, I am arguing for critical dialogue, for careful listening and questioning among ourselves, for naming what we can see and pointing out what we cannot yet, for clearly identifying our positions, language, and connections.

For these reasons I argue for a return to conceptual basics, for greater rigor in theoretical distinctions and justifications, and for increased transparency in enunciating terms and purposes of work-learning scholarship.

References


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