

BOOK REVIEW

Karen Evans, Phil Hodgkinson, Helen Rainbird, and Lorna Unwin (Editors) *Improving Workplace Learning* (London: Routledge, 2006) ISBN1 3: 978-0-415-37119-3 (hbk)

Workplace learning is a relatively new area of research for some parts of Europe (namely Central and Eastern Europe), yet it has been discussed and researched in other parts since the 1960's and the 1970's. The volume under consideration provides a good opportunity to draw attention to the relevance and significance of this field of research.

Improving Workplace Learning is based on some of the research, carried out by the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Research Programme's "research networks." The Networks carried out five projects with the intention to promoting a better understanding of workplace learning and its significance in the 21st century. As is stated in the foreword, the objective of the book is to investigate the full variety of workplace contexts and to advance knowledge by "providing evidence from a variety of organisations to show how workplace learning can be improved."

Alongside presenting empirical research the book discusses a number of theories and concepts such as the theory of situated learning, communities of practice, apprenticeship as a model of learning, informal learning and so on. The book is divided into three parts. The first part provides a theoretical framework as well as an introductory chapter, whereas the second part, titled "Findings" contains six chapters, which are the results of the empirical work on workplace learning; and the third concluding part gives a summary – or to be more precise – offers an integrated approach to conceptualizing and improving workplace learning.

In the first part of the book we are introduced to the challenges of conceptualising and researching workplace learning. The goal of the volume is to consider the potential and limits of workplace learning, as well as the contemporary theories that can shed light on the practices of learning in, for and through the workplace. One approach is to conceptualize workplace learning as learning in, for, and through the workplace. A second perspective makes connections between the types of programmes that incorporate elements of workplace learning and the non-formal aspects of learning that run through everyday workplace practices, as well as between the workplace and wider life-work relationships. This helps direct attention to the careers of workers and the theoretical frameworks that can contribute to a better understanding of the social nature of the workplace. A third approach explores the relationship between theory and practice by using theoretical concepts for analysing the constitution of practice as well as the problems that arise for people in their places of work and for conceiving of practice as a resource with which to rethink theory and received knowledge.

The main goal of companies or enterprises is to produce goods and services; however, it is clear that it is also essential for them to offer learning and teaching opportunities for their employees to become and remain competitive. Therefore, the whole concept and practice of workplace learning can be regarded as a way of developing human resources. That there are significant differences between sectors and organizational contexts is an important finding that is confirmed by a chapter titled "Expansive and Restrictive Learning Environments." This chapter is a case study, based on the theory of expansive-restrictive continuum, that examines four companies to illustrate employees' different ways of learning. The case

studies used a range of research methods such as interviews, observations and learning logs to discover the opportunities for, and barriers to learning that exist for employees in the scrutinised four enterprises. Thus, by exploring the opportunities and barriers of workplace learning it contributes to develop a new conceptual framework for workplace learning that might be productively used to improve the quality of the learning environment for the whole workplace.

Other chapters in the “Findings” section focus on the individual in the work context and the importance of individual biographies and prior experiences. The development of worker identities and workplace cultures is also treated – research which highlights the fact that workplace learning depends on the relationship between individual workers, workplace cultures, and wider structural and regulatory concerns. Other chapters examine the different governmental policies in the UK which influence workplace learning and include three case studies that examine the direct and indirect effects of governmental policies.

In its final section, the volume attempts to summarize the main points and results of research on workplace learning. One of the suggestions is to take a holistic as well as an integrated approach to understand the phenomenon of workplace learning. Finally, the authors outline five ways in which managers, trainers, trade unionists, and other practitioners can contribute to improving the workplace as a learning environment.

It is also important to highlight the high quality of the theoretical as well as the empirical studies included in this book. The authors/researchers used a variety of research methods to understand workplace learning which enhances the value of the studies. Even though the book contains an appendix that offers some details on the research methods, it would have been useful to include more concrete information about interviewers’ questions, the research surveys and other samples from the research. Apart from this minor shortcoming *Improving Workplace Learning* is a valuable result of an empirical-based research. It represents an important dimension of scholarship on European education and can be particularly useful to researchers, university instructors, and others who are carrying out research in the field of adult education.

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