

# **Karen Evans (et al.): Improving Workplace Learning. London, 2006, Routledge, 210 p.**

## **Book Review**

Workplace learning is a relatively new area of research in Hungary; yet, it has been known and researched by the Western world since the 1960's and the 1970's. Therefore, we try to draw attention to the relevance and significance of this field of research by reviewing the following book on workplace learning.

"Improving Workplace Learning" was published by Routledge in London in 2006. The authors and contributors of "Improving Workplace Learning" are: Karen Evans, Phil Hodgkinson, Helen Rainbird, and Lorna Unwin. The book is part of the Teaching Learning Research Programme (coordinated by the Institute of Education, University of London).

The foreword underlines the goals of the book: "Improving Workplace Learning investigates the variety of workplace contexts and significantly advances knowledge about workplace learning by providing evidence from a variety of organisations to show how workplace learning can be improved."

"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 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The five empirical projects were:

1. The Regulatory Framework of the Employment Relationship.
2. Recognition of Tacit Skills and Knowledge in Work Re-entry.
3. The Workplace as a site for Learning: Opportunities and Barriers in Small and Medium Sized Enterprises.
4. An Exploration of the Nature of Apprenticeship as a Site for Learning in an Advanced Economy.
5. The School as a Site for Workplace Learning.

"Improving Workplace Learning" is divided into three parts. The first part (The Issues) is a theoretical framework as well as an introductory chapter, whereas the second part (The Findings) contains six chapters, which are the results of the empirical work on workplace learning; and the third part (The Conclusion) gives a summary - or to be more precise - an integrated approach to workplace learning.

The first part introduces the perspectives and challenges of conceptualising and researching workplace learning. The goal of it 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. The first chapter introduces "perspectives that contribute to improving workplace learning in crucial ways. The first approach conceptualises workplace learning as learning in, for, and through the workplace. The second perspective makes connections between the types of programmes that incorporate an element of workplace learning and the non-formal aspects of learning that run through everyday workplace practices, between the workplace and wider life-work relationships and the careers of workers and between theoretical frameworks that can contribute to a better understanding of the social nature of the workplace. The third one 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 the people in their places of work and for conceiving of practice as a resource to rethink theory and received knowledge.”

As I indicated above the second part of “Improving Workplace Learning” presents the results of the empirical research.

The primary goal of any companies or enterprises is to produce goods and services, however, 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 resource. There are significant differences between sectors and organizational contexts and this finding is confirmed by result of the second chapter entitled “*Expansive and Restrictive Learning Environment*”.

This chapter is a case study, which is based on the theory of expansive-restrictive continuum, and which was examined in four companies to show the 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. And, according to the summary of this chapter: the value of the expansive – restrictive continuum is that it can be used by organisations to analyse the extent to which they might be able to improve the quality of the learning environment for the whole workplace.”

The third chapter (*Applying the Expansive-Restrictive Framework*) also deals with the expansive – restrictive framework and extends the analysis by indicating how the concept facilitates the understanding of the employees’ learning experiences in a variety of sectors, workplace learning sites, and to individuals at various stages in their learning and working careers.

The next chapter (*Learner biographies, workplace practices and learning*) focuses on the individual in the work context and aims to “show how aspects of employees’ individual biographies as well as their prior experiences play an important part in facilitating the “interrelationships” between employees and their workplace environments.”

The fifth chapter (*How individuals influence workplace practices and how work can change worker dispositions and identities*) considers the development of worker identities as well as workplace cultures. The results of the research highlight that workplace learning depends on the relationship between individual workers, workplace cultures, and wider structural and regulatory concerns. The authors of the fifth chapter summarise the four main points of individual workers’ contribution to influencing workplace learning:

1. “Workers/learners bring prior knowledge, understanding, and skills with them, which can contribute to their future work and learning.”
2. “The dispositions of workers, toward work, career, and learning influence the ways in which they construct and take advantage of opportunities for learning at work.”
3. “The values and dispositions of individual workers contribute to the coproduction and reproduction of the communities of practice and workplace cultures where they work.”
4. “Working and belonging to a workplace community contributes to the developing identity of the workers themselves.”

This proves that it is important to focus on both the individual as well as the workplace culture at the same in order to understand workplace learning.

The sixth chapter entitled *Workplace learning: The direct and indirect impact of policy interventions* examines the different governmental policies in the UK which influence workplace learning. The following chapter deals with the direct and indirect effects of governmental policies by presenting three case studies. The chapter is divided into three major sections. “The first considers the direct intervention in the UK social care sector through the development and application of occupational standards in domiciliary care.” The second section gives information on the direct and indirect effects of policy interventions. And, finally, the third one “considers the impact of subcontracting on learning opportunities and the nature of the learning environment in cleaning departments in

the National Health Service.”

The third part of “Improving Workplace Learning” can be regarded as an attempt to summarise the main points and results of research on workplace learning. One of the outcomes of the research is the need 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.

All in all, we can confirm that “Improving Workplace Learning” helps us to understand the phenomenon of workplace learning and its effects on employees. The authors/researchers used a variety of research methods to understand workplace learning which enhances the value of the studies. From our standpoint, however, it would have been better, if - apart from the appendix, where research methods are presented – there had been the interviewers’ questions, the research surveys and other samples of the research. Apart from this minor shortcoming “Improving Workplace Learning” is a valuable result of an empirical-based research, which can be offered to researchers, university instructors, and to anyone who is carrying out research in the field of adult education.

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