Theories of workplace learning in relation to teacher professional learning in UK primary schools

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Abstract

In this paper I examine theories of workplace learning in terms of factors that inhibit or support the learning of employees. This will include an examination of the relative influences on workplace learning at three distinct levels: government, institution and the individual. I detail how the possibilities for learning at work depend upon the interrelationship between individual worker dispositions, the affordance of the workplace to provide a restrictive or expansive learning environment, and the influence and direction of government policy. I have demonstrated the importance of the interrelationship of these three tiers of influence and how they cannot be considered in isolation when planning opportunities for teacher learning. I have also argued how there will need to be progression at each of these three stages if teacher learning is to be embedded as part of the fabric and culture of education in the United Kingdom.

Keywords: Workplace learning; Teacher learning; Individual dispositions; Expansive and Restrictive learning environments.

Introduction

My current role as head teacher and leader of staff continuing professional learning (CPL) at a primary school (ages 4–11) requires me to consider what strategies can have the greatest impact on an individual teacher's professional development and their effectiveness within their role. Taking my own personal experiences in teaching as a starting point, I have always held the belief that our most effective teachers are those who engage in professional dialogue and reflection upon practice, whether informally or formally, and are prepared to implement change in their classroom as a result. It is important to consider that this is a personally held belief that has been influenced by my individual career journey and the experiences contained within that. One of the outcomes for this paper will be an appraisal of the factors within my own professional learning, in terms of the dominant political ideology promoted through government policy, the individual learning cultures within the schools I have worked in, as well as my own individual dispositions to learning, that have informed this viewpoint.

What I will do in this paper is examine theories of workplace learning in terms of factors that inhibit or support the learning of employees. This will include an examination of the relative influences on workplace learning at three distinct levels: government, institution and the individual. This information will be examined to draw conclusions about the factors that are significant in supporting teacher professional learning in UK primary schools and the place of research-informed practice within this.

Approaches to workplace learning

In order to begin to understand the current context of workplace learning, an evaluation of recent approaches to the learning of workers needs to be considered. The assertion made in the introduction concerning the relationship between effective teaching and informal professional dialogue and reflection upon practice can be discussed here. Educational researchers (eg Hargreaves 1992; Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2005) have discussed how the main ways in which teachers learn at work are unplanned and unintentional. This relates to my assertion that professional dialogue and individuals' dispositions in terms of collaboration and reflection impact positively on their learning and development as teachers. These activities are unplanned and stand in contrast to traditional models of workplace learning and teacher professional development in particular. Marsick & Watkins (1997) use the term informal learning to describe workplace learning that takes place in everyday experience, often at subconscious levels.

Fuller et al. (2005) have highlighted the work of Lave & Wenger (1991) in contributing to the development of theories of workplace learning as a social activity or situated theory of learning. This consideration of situated learning has traditionally been more prominent in workplace learning literature than teacher learning (Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2005). Situated learning is considered to be particularly significant as it signalled a move away from the concerns of traditional learning theorists who had conceptualised the learner as a receptacle of (taught) knowledge (Fuller et al. 2005). Evans et al. (2006) have characterised this methodological shift as the move away from training in the workplace to learning in the workplace. Whereas training is viewed as the formal learning opportunities provided by employers for employees to learn new skills, workplace learning encompasses a range of different forms of learning which may or may not be formally structured. The traditional model of training is reflected in the apprenticeship model in industry and the experience of teachers going off-site to attend courses away from work. An evaluation of the influences upon the formal and informal learning opportunities for workers within this concept of situated learning will be discussed. Billett (2001) has examined the extent to which institutions afford individuals or groups of individuals these opportunities for informal learning. The following sections will illustrate the impact upon the learning opportunities made available in the workplace in terms of influences at three levels: government policy, the institution and the individual.

Approaches to workplace learning

A number of writers (Evans et al. 2006; Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004; Eaton & Carbone 2008) have highlighted the influence of government policy in setting the direction for workplace learning. Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2005) detail two dominant trends in much practice over the last 30 years that have influenced teacher learning in particular: the ideology of markets and competition promoted in the 1980s and 1990s and the growth of accountability. Fordist forms of work organisation had viewed the need to develop workers' learning only in terms of enabling them to require specialised skills to complete specific tasks inherent to their role. This has no link to the social aspects of situated learning highlighted earlier or the personal growth of the learner, and mirrors the role of the teacher who is sent out on a training course to develop a specific aspect of their practice without any consideration of the social environment and context within which they are both working and learning. This assumes a deficit model of learning whereby weaknesses in a teachers' knowledge or skills can be identified and developed through the acquisition of content and subject knowledge, reflecting technically rational assumptions of planned learning.

The technical rationalist model as defined as the competitive, transmission model of education (Edwards 2005) impacted upon teacher learning particularly in terms of the expectations upon schools in managing the learning of their employees. Education in the past two decades has been characterised by increasing government involvement in training for teachers, including a plethora of initiatives, policy statements and legislation (Macgilchrist et al. 2004). This resulted in a target-driven approach (Evans et al. 2006) to managing teachers' learning and performance such that individual teachers' professional learning was focused and designed around imposed curriculum change rather than in terms of their own learning needs. Eaton & Carbone (2008) have demonstrated how the need for professional development to result from the personal initiative of teachers was marginalised in favour of demands made by government agencies.

Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2004), in researching teacher learning in secondary schools (ages 11–16), detailed the impact of two schemes introduced by the English government to improve teacher learning: performance management and a national scheme to develop teachers' knowledge for using computers.

Both these schemes reflected what can be considered to be an entrenched view of learning as acquisition. If schools are being encouraged to promote a method of learning that doesn't involve collaboration or reflection upon practice, where teachers are placed in competition with each other through performance targets, then it is unsurprising that informal opportunities for workplace learning are not maximised. This would indicate two things in particular: that the policy approaches will not be as successful in promoting teacher learning as they could be, and the learning environment of the institution may be indirectly stifled through the promotion of a learning culture that rejects collaboration. Marsick (2009) has highlighted the influence of organisational factors on the climate for workplace learning, in particular the systems and practices in place. If opportunities for teacher informal learning are being stifled by government policy, then this will have an impact upon teacher perceptions of their ongoing professional development.

The institution

Hodkinson & Hodkinson's (2004) study on workplace learning in secondary schools also indicated that although policy initiatives may be the same for different schools, their relative influence upon teacher learning may differ from school to school. This indicates that there are factors involved at both the institutional and individual level that can impact significantly upon teacher learning. It appears evident from the literature that institutional factors influence workers' access to formal and informal learning opportunities. It has been already noted that the workplace offers significant informal opportunities for learning. Evans et al. (2006) have described the influence of the hidden workplace curriculum which functions in addition to the formal opportunities that are offered to workers to support their professional development. Fuller et al.'s (2005) study of workplace learning in secondary schools illustrated the impact of this situated learning that is often subconsciously undertaken through normal working hours. One factor discussed in detail involved the significance of the quality of working relationships within individual subject departments. Where there was a high degree of collaboration and mutual support, this was seen to be an influential factor in promoting learning opportunities for those workers, through such informal activities as advice or occasional instruction. Learning was seen to be an integral and often unconscious part of their lives within their working communities (Fuller et al. 2005: 60). Marsick (2009) also highlights the significance of organisational factors, such as culture, systems and practices, in stimulating opportunities for informal learning.

The term 'communities of practice' was introduced by Lave & Wenger (1991) to describe the learning that takes place as an integral dimension of social practice. It has been influential in the work of a number of theorists on workplace learning (eg Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004, 2005; Evans et al. 2006; Elliot 2007). Working and belonging within this community contributes to the sense of identity of the workers (Evans et al. 2006) and they therefore engage in learning within the social practices of the workplace and contribute to the learning of others. Returning to Hodkinson & Hodkinson's (2004) study of workers in different subject departments within the same secondary school, evaluation of the data emphasised the extent to which collaboration within the departments impacted upon the learning of the teachers. Where these departments were assessed as being more closely collaborative, greater informal learning opportunities were observed as part of

the daily lives of the teachers involved (Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004). These findings are mirrored in Jurasaite-Harbison's (2009) study of teachers' workplace learning in the United States and Lithuania. Her research also highlighted the importance of a strong collaborative culture in facilitating teacher professional development.

It seems evident therefore that the propensity of the working environment to provide informal learning opportunities impacts upon the quality of learning for workers. If formal opportunities for learning are also taken into consideration, to what extent can a school promote a positive learning environment for its staff? A number of researchers (Fuller et al. 2005; Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004, 2005; Evans et al. 2006) have discussed the concept of expansive and restrictive learning communities to explain the extent to which a workplace can impact positively or negatively on the formal and informal opportunities available to support workers' learning. Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2005: 123) have described the expansive learning environment to be one that presents wide-ranging and diverse opportunities to learn, in a culture that values and supports learning. If aspects of the expansive learning environment are related to research on teacher professional learning, key factors to promote teacher learning can be identified. These include the extent to which the environment: provides opportunities for collaborative working (Cordingley 2004); is mutually supportive (Elliot 2007); supports teacher learning as an embedded feature of classroom practice (Pedder et al. 2005); supports opportunities to learn out of school (Evans et al. 2006); and offers opportunities to work in different groups (Macgilchrist et al. 2004). Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2005) describe a restrictive learning environment characterised by teachers working in isolation with no explicit focus on teacher learning and few expansive learning opportunities provided for teachers either in or out of school.

In addition to the expansive learning environment described above, the research literature suggests several key factors at the institutional level that have a positive impact in supporting teacher learning. The social community has been identified as being particularly significant in influencing workplace learning. This community is made up of individuals and it is the extent to which they are individually positive, supportive and collaborative (Furlong & Salisbury 2005) that maintains the collective expansive learning culture. Leadership within the organisation is pivotal in modelling and promoting this collaborative learning culture. Research has demonstrated the role of senior managers in exerting significant influence

on the workplace culture (Evans et al. 2006), and the commitment of the head teacher and senior leadership team was considered to be crucial to teacher engagement in learning opportunities (Burns & Haydn 2002).

Leadership can make the difference between environments that are constraining for professional learning and those that are supportive (Marsick 2009). The leadership within the school therefore make decisions that can have a positive or negative impact upon the learning culture, both in terms of conscious decisions to provide formal learning opportunities and unconscious decisions that promote a positive learning environment. Decisions can be made on the allocation of resources to support teacher professional learning both within school and outside school and the practical activities that are provided to support teacher learning, for example observing others, mentoring and coaching, collaborative working and opportunities to take risks and make mistakes (Evans et al. 2006). Leaders will have the ability to influence the culture of the workplace to the extent to which learning becomes an integral part of everyday practices as well as the extent to which they provide positive or negative support for their teachers' learning (Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2005). Formal and informal processes that foster a climate in which teachers are encouraged to learn (Pedder et al. 2005) and learning is promoted at all levels of the organisation (Macgilchrist et al. 2004) will be coordinated by leadership within the school. The institution, both in terms of leadership and the contribution of individual workers to communities of practice, will therefore influence the extent to which the learning environment is expansive or restrictive. My experience has highlighted the importance of leaders at all levels in schools in promoting professional learning activities and the positive impact this has on the learning of all staff.

The role of the individual

The significance of the role of the individual in influencing the extent of engagement in professional learning will be highlighted in this paper. Hodkinson & Hodkinson's (2004) study illustrated how even when government policy and institutional influences on teacher learning were the same within a single school, different learners could perceive the same learning opportunities on offer in different ways. This suggests that there are significant influencing factors at the individual level that affect teacher engagement in professional learning. A number of writers (eg Burns & Haydn 2002; Pedder et al. 2005; Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004, 2005; Fuller et al. 2005; Evans

et al. 2006) have referred to the influence of past experiences and individuals' dispositions to learning in directing teachers' engagement in the learning opportunities offered in the workplace. Billet (2001) has emphasised the importance of individual agency in shaping engagement in work practices and what is learnt.

Taking past experiences as an example, Fuller et al. (2006: 66) have discussed the fact that people come to a workplace already formed with beliefs, understandings, skills and attitudes to life, to work, to learning. In relating the individual to the institutional environment and culture that is promoting worker learning, Evans et al. (2006) have attempted to clarify the relationship between individuals and the opportunities and barriers to learning they may encounter at work. A distinction is clarified between the extent to which the organisational and pedagogical context affords access to diverse forms of participation and the extent to which individuals elect to engage in these activities through the exercise of individual agency (Evans et al. 2006: 30).

These individual dispositions to learning and life biographies will therefore impact upon each individual's current and future workplace learning. Their personal attitudes to learning may influence the extent to which they view their workplace learning environment to be more or less restrictive or expansive. There may also be additional factors within the individual's life biography that influence his/her decision-making. As important as it is to recognise the structure and culture of the workplace learning environment in shaping the design and availability of workplace learning opportunities, one must also take into consideration the fact that individuals do have their individual agency and can therefore decide the extent to which they choose to engage in the activities on offer. Individuals participating in the same learning environment may experience that environment as more or less expansive or restrictive depending on personal factors such as their socio-economic and educational background, attitudes to work and learning, and aspirations (Evans et al. 2006: 39).

In discussing these individual beliefs, understandings, skills and attitudes that each worker brings to the workplace, it is also worth considering the impact of professionals' tacit skills on their learning. Thomas (in Thomas & Pring 2004) relates the tacit skills that teachers gain from their day-to-day experiences to the concept of intuition and craft knowledge. In this context, these tacit skills are related to the knowledge that is built of all the information and evidence that

is consciously and subconsciously accumulated by the practitioner both deliberately and fortuitously about their workplace learning environment. This craft knowledge will impact on the extent to which workers engage in professional learning. It also influences their self-perception as learners. Practitioners can make their learning environment more restrictive or expansive dependent upon the personal choices they make. From a simple perspective, one can be positive and proactive about a learning opportunity, or negative, and this will clearly influence the level of learning involved. Evans et al. (2006: 98) refer to a study of Australian colleges where experienced workers resented being labelled 'learners' because that somehow implied that they were not competent in their jobs. A practitioner with a more positive disposition to learning may interpret this same situation as a positive affirmation of his/her expectations as a lifelong learner! Individual dispositions to learning therefore impact upon the extent to which individuals engage in the learning opportunities on offer.

The interrelationship of the three tiers of influence

What is indicated from the evidence presented in this paper is that the possibilities for learning at work depend upon the interrelationship between individual worker dispositions, the affordance of the workplace to provide a restrictive or expansive learning environment, and the influence and direction of government policy, rather than upon any of these factors taken in isolation. The examples highlighted in this study demonstrate the importance of all three tiers of influence in providing positive impetus for the formal and informal learning opportunities available to workers. Where government policy has allowed local authorities to focus on giving opportunities for schools and individuals to increase and extend the professionalism and learning of their teachers (see Binnie et al.'s (2008) study of action enquiry in schools in West Lothian), it appears that the impact on teacher and pupil learning is evident.

The interrelationship between the workplace learning environment and individual dispositions to learning needs also to be considered when planning for workplace learning. Senge (2005) has asserted the need for institutions to develop the processes and practices of a learning organisation, where informal and formal learning activities represent an intrinsic part of the culture of the workplace. This would exert considerable influence in promoting an expansive learning environment to encourage workers to develop positive dispositions to learning. Where teacher learning, for example, is seen as an embedded

aspect of the role of the teacher, its importance will be valued and reflected more widely across the staff. Within this context, the culture of the workplace will influence the dispositions to learning of the individual, and vice versa, with each dependent on the other, and learning at the centre. Marsick (2009) has promoted the management of informal learning through the strengthening of systems and practices, rather than micromanaging learning activities. However, it is evident that, in practice, this 'learning organisation' is difficult to achieve, and many of the tensions involved have been highlighted earlier. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the significance of the situated learning that takes place in the workplace, and the extent to which it offers an expansive learning environment to maximise the learning opportunities on offer.

Conclusions

This paper has provided an overview of theories of workplace learning in relation to teacher professional development. A model of teacher professional learning in schools has been presented. Factors that inhibit and support teacher learning have been discussed at three distinct levels: government, institution and the individual. I have discussed the importance of the interrelationship of these three tiers of influence and how they cannot be considered in isolation when planning opportunities for teacher learning. Government pressures will impact on the decisions schools make. Schools will elect to allocate funding towards government-imposed priorities rather than towards more creative, teacher-led approaches to continuing professional development.

The significance of the learning environment and individual dispositions to learning has been discussed, particularly in terms of their interdependence on each other. Where a school creates a learning environment that provides formal and informal learning opportunities for its staff, teacher learning is promoted at all levels, and the significance of senior leaders in modelling and driving this approach has been highlighted. Marsick & Watkins (1997) have emphasised the importance of planning for informal learning, where conditions are purposefully created to increase the probability that informal workplace learning occurs. The interdependence has been clarified through the assertion that the more expansive the learning environment, the greater the likelihood that a higher proportion of teachers, all with their own individual dispositions to learning, will take advantage of the diverse range of learning opportunities on offer. Conversely, Evans et al. (2006) have detailed how individuals influence and contribute to shaping the culture of the workplace and learning environment.

Returning to the assertion made in the introduction, I can now see that many of my personally held beliefs about teacher professional learning have been influenced by: participation in opportunities provided through government policy (see Furlong & Salisbury's (2005) evaluation of Best Practice Research Scholarships, of which I was a recipient); institutions in which I have worked that have displayed characteristics of expansive learning environments; and my own attitude to lifelong learning. There will need to be progression at each of these three stages if teacher learning is to be embedded as part of the fabric and culture of education in this country.

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