A relational re-view of collective learning:
Concerts, condiments and corrections

Mary Chen Johnsson

Dissertation submitted to the
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of Technology, Sydney
In fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Education

PhD
2009
Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate
Acknowledgements

A thesis, particularly one on collective learning, is considered an individual accomplishment but achieved through the generosity of collective endeavours from many people. I wish to thank Paul Hager for his unconditional encouragement and guidance from beginning to end. Paul was both my thesis supervisor and the Chief Investigator on an Australian Research Council Discovery grant project where I participated as researcher. Paul re-ignited my appreciation for the practical relevance of philosophical thought and guided me through the thesis journey. I benefited also from the expertise of Jim Athanasou, my initial supervisor and Hermine Scheeres, my co-supervisor and discourse coach. They guided me through important conceptual and research landmarks and offered me alternative ways of thinking about concepts and their meanings.

I thank all the research participants in the numerous organisations that formed my fieldwork portfolio, some of whom are included in this thesis. These research participants, who remain necessarily anonymous, allowed me to gain glimpses of their lives as people, their lives at work and their understandings of learning. Through my interactions with them, I gained a renewed understanding of my own learning as a practitioner turned researcher.

I am grateful for the stimulating discussions I have had with students and faculty at UTS: Education, especially Geof, Bernice, Kerry, Donna and Oriana who were always ready to offer advice, literature, coffee, batteries and shoulders when required. I benefited immensely from writing with John Halliday in the cyberspace between Australia and Scotland. I thank my parents for their continued support and belief in me. Special thanks to my husband Ulf who provided unwavering support at home so that I could explore my own learning possibilities.

I dedicate this thesis to two business mentors whose wisdom and generous counsel greatly influenced my relational understandings of work and learning: John and in memoriam to Michael who died in the tragedy of 9/11.
Partial List of Publications

The following list represents my published journal articles and refereed conference papers that received academic awards and prizes. Some of these publications are referenced throughout this thesis document to support my points on the conceptualisations of collective learning from my investigation. A complete list of publications generated during my doctoral candidature is included in Appendix 5.

Journal Articles


Refereed Conference Papers Receiving Awards and Prizes


## Table of Contents

Certificate of Authorship/Originality ................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................ iii
Partial List of Publications ................................................................................ iv
Table of Contents ................................................................................................ v
Abstract ............................................................................................................. viii

### Chapter One
Introduction: Re-viewing the Collective in Workplace Learning ......................... 1
1.1 Introducing the central concerns of this thesis for researching practice .......... 1
1.2 Introducing my thesis from within the Informal Learning project .................. 4
1.3 Introducing my research questions ............................................................. 7
1.4 Introducing my research sites ................................................................... 8
1.5 Introducing relational terminology and how core terms are used ............... 12
1.6 Organisation of this thesis ....................................................................... 15

### Chapter Two
2.1 Group learning literature: An organising framework .................................... 21
2.2 The entity-resource view of learning: Groups as entities that learn ............. 28
2.3 The activity-system view of learning: Group processes, situatedness and community ...... 39
2.4 The ecological-relational view of learning: Patterns of group interactions .... 55
2.5 Toward a generative theory of collective learning ........................................ 72
2.6 Summary: Theorising/practising how groups learn at work ....................... 76

### Chapter Three
Qualitative Research Practices that Investigate How Groups Learn ................. 78
3.1 Epistemological assumptions underlying the interpretive tradition ............. 80
3.2 Research design and selection: Triangulated case studies .......................... 87
3.3 From data collection to data analysis ......................................................... 92
3.4 Emergent research practice: Modes of co-operative inquiry and ‘writing up’ .... 99
3.5 Reflecting my relational voice: From strangers to colleagues who matter ...... 104
3.6 Summary: Researching group learning practices ..................................... 108

### Chapter Four
Acting in Concert: How Groups Relate by Acting Together ............................. 109
4.1 Guiding learning through living curricula .................................................. 112
4.2 How developing musicians learn from others: At work and from mentors .......... 114
4.3 How apprentice chefs learn from others: At work and from a focus group .... 124
4.4 Acting as if apprenticing anew ................................................................. 140
4.5 Summary: Acting together at work ......................................................... 142
Chapter Five
Choreographing Conversations: How Groups Relate by Talking Together ..........144
5.1 Group talk at work: D/discourse .................................................................146
5.2 How orchestral musicians dance the talk of becoming professional ..........147
5.3 How programs staff position their talk about helping drug offenders ..........156
5.4 Choreographing through text ......................................................................165
5.5 Summary: Talking together at work .............................................................171

Chapter Six
Conjecture and Consequences: How Groups Relate by Judging Together ........175
6.1 Judging at work: Discriminating in a world of roles, rules and relations ........177
6.2 How corrections staff judge motivations for ways of working together .........181
6.3 How chefs learn by judging with others across diverse situations .............191
6.4 Judging as poietic patterns of engagement and commitment .......................197
6.5 Summary: Judging together at work .............................................................200

Chapter Seven
Contextualising Learning: Patterns of Relational Acting, Talking and Judging ......202
7.1 Moving beyond situatedness: Conceptualising contextualising ....................207
7.2 Contextualising in practice from the limitations of context as descriptive setting
or situatedness .................................................................................................216
7.3 Contextualising in practice from the benefits of contextualising together .....227
7.4 Contextualising practice patterns and learning possibilities .........................236
7.5 Summary: Contextualising together at work ...............................................238

Chapter Eight
Conclusions and Implications: Harnessing the Wisdom of the Collective ........241
8.1 Revisiting my research questions and the issues explored in this thesis ..........245
8.2 Contributions to how groups learn during ‘transitions’ to work .....................247
8.3 Contributions to how groups learn in practice at work ..................................252
8.4 Contributions to researching collective learning theory and practice .............256
8.5 Summary: Re-viewing collective learning as contextualising
moments of connections .................................................................................260

List of Appendices ..............................................................................................262
Appendix 1: Overview of Case Study Organisations .............................................263
Appendix 2: Consent Forms and Participant Information Sheet .............................270
Appendix 3: Observation, Interview and Document Data ......................................275
Appendix 4: Transcription Conventions and Notes ..............................................282
Appendix 5: List of Publications ..........................................................................284

References ..........................................................................................................287
List of Figures

Figure 1: A categorisation of learning research domains ............................................. 22
Figure 2: Disciplinary influences that continue to reinforce an entitative view of collective learning ............................................................... 37
Figure 3: Domain 3 literature converging on ‘the interactional space’ of relational practice .............................................................................. 66
Figure 4: Multiple data analysis methods used .............................................................. 97
Figure 5: Collective performing in rehearsal (researcher account) .............................. 117
Figure 6 : À la carte lunch menu ................................................................................ 128
Figure 7 Interactions in à la carte service (activity highlights) ................................ 129
Figure 8: Situating the learning of developing musicians at SymCo ....................... 223
Figure 9: The jewfish incident at KitchCo ................................................................. 229
Figure 10: Alternative view of the jewfish incident at KitchCo from the perspective of interactional understandings ................................................... 231
Figure 11: The rehearsal incident and the search incident from the perspective of interactional understandings .............................................. 235

List of Tables

Table 1: Domain 1 literature examining group properties as drivers of desired output ................................................................. 33
Table 2: Kasl et al.’s (1997) model of team learning .................................................. 45
Table 3: Complexity principles and their analogies for human learning ............... 64
Table 4: Summarising the differences across Domains 1, 2 and 3 ......................... 73
Table 5: Data collection methods and scope of data collected at the three case study organisations ...................................................... 94
Table 6: Mentors guiding paths to follow and paths to avoid ................................ 121
Table 7: Experienced chef observations about judgement-based learning at work ............................................................. 192
Table 8: Stewart’s observations about learning at school versus judgement-based learning at work ......................................................... 194
Table 9: Jack’s perspective on learning judgements during his apprenticeship tenure ................................................................. 195
Table 10: Comparative characteristics across the three case organisations .......... 217
Table 11: Contextualising examples from the three case studies ......................... 228
Abstract

Work in organisations is a shared and joint endeavour often accomplished by groups, teams or other collectives. Yet groups at work do not always learn at work, limiting an organisation’s capability to thrive in knowledge economies. Research investigating collective learning at work continues to place the analytic focus on entities or abstractions representing the collective. For example, culture, power, group membership, group structure, group communications, motivations and skills are often examined to explain why groups learn or not in organisations.

In contrast, this thesis investigates what it means to learn together when people act, talk and judge at work through their relational and responsive interactions. This relational orientation conceptualises learning as emerging from patterns of interactions that are responsive to local contexts and shaped by practical sensemaking that occurs in the everyday practice of work life.

Specifically in the case study interpretive tradition, I investigate the relational practices of dyads and small groups in three disparate organisational contexts and professions. The organisational, group and individual characteristics differ widely for musicians in an orchestra, apprentice chefs in a commercial kitchen and rehabilitation staff in a corrections centre. Yet these three groups shared relational similarities in learning how to weave ways of acting, talking and judging together to make their work ‘work’. Such weaving together is enabled by shifting conceptually from notions of context as descriptive setting or situatedness to the notion of groups contextualising together.
This thesis contributes to collective learning research by highlighting the significance of patterns of interactions and the dynamics of practice. The findings enhance existing collective learning theory by including spatio-temporal concepts from theories of organisational change and complexity. The findings have implications for guiding the learning of commencing practitioners into professions as well as for generating modes of transdisciplinary learning across professions. Re-viewing collective learning in relational ways recognises that learning is an emergent phenomenon, each time practised anew from interactions between people and the possibilities that lie within.

The Latin prefix *con* means *with*. It seems appropriate that *concerts* performed by musicians, *condiments* added to dishes by chefs and the *consequences* of behaviours by corrections staff across diverse *contexts* of work can provide practical insights for better understanding how groups learn collectively at work.