

‘I DON’T THINK I AM A LEARNER’: ACTS OF NAMING LEARNERS AT WORK

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Abstract

The terms ‘learning’ and ‘learner’ are used in discussions of workplace learning as if they were unproblematic and as if workers, organisations and researchers had a common shared view about what these terms mean. A study of four different workgroups within an organisation in which the discourse of learning was pervasive, suggests that having an identity as a learner may not be compatible with being regarded as a competent worker. The politics of naming oneself as a learner are considered and the power of naming learning and learners are discussed. The broader implications for research on workplace learning of such a discursive approach are noted.

The conjunction of worker and learner and of working and learning is taken for granted in contemporary organisational and adult learning discourses. Lifelong learning, learning organisations, situated learning theories, to name just a few, all use the idea that learning occurs outside formal classroom settings and that such learning is legitimate, of value and to be encouraged. But are these relationships as simple as might be suggested? Are there problems in conflating learning and working and in being a worker at the same time as being a learner? Such questions are of interest to researchers and scholars in the field but are also of interest to organisations actively seeking to capitalise on this kind of learning in order to foster more productive learning at work.

This paper explores these questions drawing on a collaborative research project, entitled ‘Uncovering Learning at Work’. It is an Australian Research Council funded collaborative project between the University of Technology, Sydney and a state government department. It focuses on four work groups within two vocational education and training institutions—a group of trade teachers, a group of office staff, a group of strategy planners and a group of workplace trainers. The project aims to find ways in which learning that occurs in and through every day work can be more effectively utilised within organisations.

In the paper we focus primarily on the way 'learning' is spoken about (and not spoken about) by employees in these various work groups. In particular we explore the politics and identity tensions that we have found amongst the research participants in regard to understanding and naming themselves as learners as well as workers. The paper suggests that the act of naming oneself as a learner is a complex one which opens up issues related to position, recognition and power in any given group. Identifying as a learner at work can place one in uncomfortable and problematic situations.

Our interest in the naming of learning and learners at work is located in a particular set of theoretical orientations that we believe most effectively contribute to a project that is exploring learning at work, when learning is often not named as learning. Of particular importance for us are the theoretical resources that understand language as having a central role for producing social realities and creating domains of thought and action. Our research on naming works with the idea that language is a technology for constructing what can and can't be thought and what can and can't be done. These understandings draw on a number of social theorists (for example Freire, 1970; du Gay, 1996; Rorty, 1982; Miller & Rose, 1990; Shirato & Yell, 2000; Lee & Poynton, 2000).

Our interest in naming and language also takes us into related understandings of discourse and discourse analysis. Within these understandings there is a view that the relationship of power and knowledge and self is brought about through discursive practices (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982; Foucault, 1991). We have found, like other researchers, discourse analysis to be a useful tool for exploring the nexus of knowledge and power and for investigating how people engage with various ways of knowing as they participate in the social relations appropriate to specific institutions (Poynton, 2000). This kind of focus on language draws us into different, although complementary understandings of power relationships in workplaces, compared to understandings discussed by researchers who are engaged in more critical approaches (Foley 1999).

The relationship of work and learning

In traditional discourses work and learning are usually understood as differentiated practices, each involving distinctive forms of language and sets of actions. The nature of

these practices and their differences do not happen by chance, but rather are produced within particular kinds of discursive domains and through disciplinary practices that are connected to their different locations. Within these discourses it is understood that learning occurs in educational institutions while work happens in workplaces.

However in more contemporary discourses this sharp separation of work and learning is being problematised. Indeed within the knowledge economy and knowledge worker discourses, learning has escaped from the walls of the classroom and has taken on many uses, shapes and meanings (eg. Boud, 2001). Some examples of this pluralisation are the concepts of lifelong learning, learning organisations, work-based learning partnerships and e-learning. Furthermore, learning is often considered to happen everywhere, as something that occurs throughout life regardless of whether or not it is talked about, managed or placed in some kind of institutional practice. We are led to believe that the 'learning' that goes on at work is productive and good for both organisations and individuals.

This research project picks up on this dispersal of learning. It takes up the relationship between working and learning and the accompanying contemporary importance given to workplaces as sites of learning and knowledge production (Symes & McIntyre, 2000; Boud & Solomon, 2001) and employees as worker/learners (Chappell et al, 2003; Tennant, 2000; Usher & Solomon, 1999).

The focus of this paper is the worker/learner identity and in particular questions around the naming of workers as learners by the workers themselves. Specifically these questions are:

- If we understand something we do as learning, do we understand and identify ourselves as learners?
- What happens to our identity as workers if we deliberately name ourselves as learners?

Investigating learning and learners at work

Given our interest is on how learning and learners at work are spoken about, we will focus this paper on our analysis of the 'talking' aspects of the investigations. The two main 'talking' techniques used were interviews and group feedback sessions. Long interviews were held with each participant. These interviews focused on identifying the 'who', the 'what' and

the ‘how’ of learning in order to explore the ways employees do and don’t talk about their work as learning. In the interviews we used two sets of questions—in one set we avoided the use of the word learning and in the second we directly asked about workplace learning. We undertook a discourse analysis of the interview transcripts (Fairclough, 1992). In this we examined *inter alia* how ‘learning’ language was used and how participants talked about those aspects of their work that might be expected to involve learning (ie. coping with workplace changes).

The research team subsequently met with each of the working groups, as part of the collaborative approach of the project. The team provided feedback on what we found in our analysis of the interviews in order to ‘get the group thinking and talking about learning at work’. The focus was on talking about how we might work further with each of the groups in a project that was named as about ‘learning at work’. In doing so the main topic was about naming or not naming things as learning, and about naming or not naming oneself as a learner.

Talking about learning

There are different ways to read and interpret the transcripts of this first set of questions and the responses. We found that when there was little conventional talk about learning *per se*; understanding the significance of work in learning terms can be a slippery task. For example, one reading of the transcripts understood them to be stories about the identity and relationships of the employees, that is, how employees position themselves and how they are positioned in their work and within their organisation. This is not to say that such things are not relevant to learning but rather that ‘learning’ is not foregrounded. This kind of reading is similar to the work of other contemporary learning theorists, such as Lave & Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1999). In their conceptual work on communities of practice the term ‘learning’ is almost absent. In its place we have terms such as shared repertoire, mutual engagement, participation, negotiation of meanings and accompanying concepts—terms that foreground the significance of the social relationships.

Another reading of the transcripts understands them as stories about various practices—those that are articulated as working practices, but which can also be understood as learning practices. Across individuals and groups a number of these were identified, which we

organised around three categories: mastery of organisational processes (including technical ones), dealing with the atypical and negotiating the political (Boud & Middleton, 2003).

Predictably, there was considerable variation in the groups in terms of the spread of their practices across these categories. For example, a great deal of the work of those in the strategy planning unit connected with 'negotiating the political', while the work of those in the trade teachers group (except for the head) fell into the category of mastery of organisational processes.

As indicated above, in the interviews a second set of questions directly asked about workplace learning. The questions were expressed as either 'What is your understanding of workplace learning?' or 'Tell me your understanding of the concept?' While the responses varied considerably, most participants approached the question in a similar way. That is, when talking about 'workplace learning', they made no reference to the various work practices they has spoken about in response to the first set of questions. In other words no one revisited these work practices or attempted to talk about them in learning terms. Indeed the responses were of a completely different nature and while they varied in their detail, they were expressed in conventional learning and educational terms. Some examples are as follows:

A relates learning to researching one's job:

A: To me workplace learning is researching to make notes, listening to other teachers, listening to students, believe it or not, because you can learn a lot from the students and keeping up with products used within industry.'

B relates to learning as being about one's development as a person:

B: I think the most important aspect of it is what it does to you as a person—how it changes you ... You spend so much time at work and if you can't learn and be developed from the workplace culture then I don't think formal learning is going to help you a lot.

C draws attention to the relationship between formal and informal learning:

C: finding out what people are interested in ... and helping them to achieve [it] or helping them if it's ... something they want to learn about ... It may be acting in that position so they get a little bit more knowledge or ... they might have to do an in-house training on something that interests them involving where they work.

D draws on adult learning literature and talks about 'reflection on experience'.

D: A set of experiences that on reflection change your view and move you forward in some way so that your experience touches reflection issuing some kind of change that you could define as learning.

In the feedback sessions we asked each group whether or not the interview triggered any thoughts about learning. We were interested in whether or not the talk about learning at the interviews had in some way produced a social reality or a particular kind of knowledge about the topic. Again the responses varied, although overall it could be said that most participants suggested that the interview had had an effect on them and did stimulate ideas about either their learning or learning in general. For example:

E: I always try to take it on board and use it to teach. If I'm thinking about how I'm learning, I like to apply that to how I teach. It made me reflect on how I learn. Surely that's relevant to how I teach?

B: It made me think about how much stuff out there that's informally acquired—it's just huge.

A: I didn't realise how much I was learning from the students ... in reality we haven't got a clue what's going on out there [external work sites], it's constantly changing. Sometimes I think I'm learning a lot more from my students than I'm teaching them.

F: when I went away and thought about ... what you do on a daily basis ... what you're using within your team and ... how you're teaching them ... you actually learn from others as well.

In the feedback sessions when the conversation turned to what learning is, the responses again were reasonably conventional ones. Most participants, in one way or another, talked about learning in the following familiar ways. These included: training or formal staff development; preparing oneself to be productive; coping with change; what one's students do; it not being possible when one is busy; and learning as conscious rather than automatic. There were however some exceptions. For example, one participant said that learning was indistinguishable from working, while another suggested that learning is something that just happens.

In summary, the talk about learning confirmed a number of the complexities others have found around the naming of learning at work. For a start it 'uncovered' the multiplicities of its use and, importantly, this naming did seem to legitimise otherwise undervalued aspects of work. However the act of naming something as learning also drew attention to contradictions. For some it made explicit that learning alongside work created tensions.

Talking about being a learner

When the ‘talk’ in the feedback sessions turned to issues around naming oneself as a learner complexities around this seemingly unproblematic concept surfaced.

The first quotes from two teachers illustrate fairly conventional positions of the identities of learners and teachers in classrooms, where students are the learners and teachers are the teachers. While there is some recognition that they might learn from some students, there is a resistance to naming themselves as a learner in that context. However, at the same time, with experienced colleagues it seems acceptable to understand and name oneself as a learner.

G: ... when I’ve got students around me, I don’t seem like I’m learning now, I’m the one doing the teaching. As far as I’m concerned I’m the one in control. I’m the one with the knowledge that’s being passed over. I’ve got the experience. But when I’m in the presence of someone like [my colleagues here], where they’ve got background information and skills ... I’m on the other side of the situation where I’m the learner. But when the students have got me and I’m in control—OK there might be things that are passed onto to me that I don’t know, so I suppose I do a little bit of learning—in my frame of mind I don’t think of it as ‘I am the learner’.

H: I take on board wherever I can whatever I can, without thinking about it as learning ... I don’t see myself as being a learner. I’m happy with what I know at the moment and whatever comes along I’ll use if it’s appropriate ... I want to know what I need to do my job. What I need to teach my students and give them the best knowledge as well.

I, who works in the office work group, takes up the idea that working and learning happen together, but at the same time resists identification with the idea of being a ‘learner’.

I. We’re working in an environment where workplace learning takes place every day. It’s not a conscious awareness necessarily but it certainly takes place every day. From my perspective, being identified as a worker or learner I’d have to say, I’m aware that I learn but I’d probably more identify as a worker.

J, who is a colleague of A, is much more explicit about her reasons for distancing herself from being a ‘learner’. She uses a ‘L’ plate (learning to drive) metaphor powerfully to draw attention to the problem of being labelled a learner.

C: I think sometimes when we say the word learning, you think of someone driving a car, ‘L’ plates. Exactly. I’ve still got my “L” plates. You kind of think they haven’t been in the job for too long, and this kind of thing – whereas you can be in the job twenty years and still be learning... [Lots of agreement on this idea]

B in the strategy group shares C's concern with the negative image that being a learner presents to the world:

B: Well I do [learn] but I wouldn't present myself as a learner because that would suggest that you didn't know what you were doing. You've always got to present with some kind of approach that's got a professionalism about it.

She does however recognise the influence of the context on taking on such a label.

B: ... you [name yourself as a learner] in comfortable situations, like you do that amongst yourselves, but if you go outside that loop, you define the boundaries about where you're going to present yourself in that way ... It varies from different contexts how you present yourself.

K, from a different group than where it was first used, also uses the 'L' plate metaphor to illustrate the impossibility of naming himself as a learner in some situations. This is in spite of the fact that he can acknowledge that the process of learning is intrinsic to his job:

K: I often feel like a teacher in a room that's about one page ahead of the students. The job is absolutely all about learning. There's not a day or a minute goes by that you're not learning something that impacts on numerous other things that you're doing ... it is one hundred per cent learning. And the stuff that we do present, is after we've learned it, and made a decision on it, that's when we present it ... You can't present as a learner.

His colleague L accepts the appropriateness of the 'L' plate metaphor and adds his own:

L: The term I use quite a lot is 'maintaining the ascendance'. I use ascendance as a metaphor because we just simply cannot afford, if we get knocked off, then the institute, the whole structure, there's questions on the whole way of the organisation structure and its development. So we can't afford a more public forum to be seen to be small 'L' players, capital 'L' players. That's not to say that we would take a very assertive view of the world and be aggressively ascendant, we would step back, we've learnt to step back and redo. But I think the notion of the 'L' plates, that's a good metaphor.

One of the key points made is that to name oneself as a learner suggests incompetence or lack of expertise in performing one's tasks, as exemplified in the 'L plate' metaphor. While this image seemed to be a predominant concern others expressed the view that to be a learner suggested one was showing willing or more 'neutrally' was simply engaged in learning.

Therefore to be a learner can be literally understood as someone engaged in learning or showing willingness to know more (as suggested by the contemporary celebration of the worker/learner identity). However, at the same time there is a contestation around being named as a learner. As suggested above, for some employees being named a learner operates

against positive aspects of their working identity and can be understood as a sign that one is not an adequate worker.

Discussion

We suggest there is a politics around naming oneself as a learner. This is connected to maintaining a position vis a vis others, recognising oneself as having a valued place in a work group and legitimation as a competent worker. These are different manifestations of power within a particular context. The examples of naming (and not naming) learners and learning show workers productively using discourse as a form of power to protect their identities and enhance their position in the organisation (Gore 1995). Learning and being a learner can be understood as a strength for the organisation and for the individual, when this is seen as adding value to ones work. However, the process of learning and being identified as a 'learner' creates professional and institutional tensions and associations of being a novice or a person who has yet to be accepted as a fully functioning worker. It can present a challenge to existing relationships and image. Being a learner is a risky business as it can position one apart from the group.

We point out in concluding that our study took place within an organisation which has learning as its *raison d'être* and in which there is a much more elaborated discourse about workplace learning and the value of it than is the case for most organisations. However, the tensions about naming oneself as a learner were not more apparent in the workgroups most imbued with this institutional discourse. The study thus leaves us with important questions around the identification of learners at work: under what circumstances can a worker identify as a learner without negative consequences? Can discourses of learning be established in workplaces that embrace learning as integral to work? How can the foregrounding of learning in work be made less risky?

Finally, there are important implications for researchers. The terms 'learning' and 'learner' are often used in research on workplace and organisational learning as if they were unproblematic and there was a shared meaning about what they referred to. Our research illustrates that every time these words are used in workplaces, they have meanings beyond what researchers may expect. They inevitably provide indicators of power relations at work and are part of its social construction.

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