

ID 008: The Influence of Biographies and Individual Agency on the Culture of Employee Learning: The Case of Administrative Assistants at a South African University

Mavunga, George (University of Johannesburg)

Abstract

Based on a study at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) involving administrative assistants who deal directly with academic issues, this paper looks at how biographies and individual agency mediate the culture of employee learning. The study was motivated by the realization that employee learning in South African organisations is still largely premised on Human Capital Theory which privileges the role of the normative state and organizational strategies, policies and programmes over the employees' own biographies and individual agency. A qualitative approach was adopted and semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. Biographical aspects such as the broad social environment and family backgrounds were found to have a strong influence on the administrative assistants' culture of employee learning. So also did aspects related to individual agency like motivation, attitudes and perceptions. The paper suggests that in addition to paying attention to what happens in the official domain of employee learning, UJ management needs to consider the role of biographies and individual agency in the formulation of the employee learning project. This will assist with alignment of the institutional vision to the administrative assistants' career development aspirations.

Introduction

The culture of employee learning and its conceptualisation is a dynamic and complex phenomenon whose understanding management and human resources development practitioners as well as academics in the field are continuously grappling with (Govender, 2009). Previously this culture was seen as an exclusive function of organizational strategic initiatives, on one hand, and the response to these initiatives by collective entities such as workers' unions and work teams, on the other. However, this notion began to be challenged in the 1990s with further attention being drawn to the role played by employees' biographies and individual agency in shaping their culture of employee learning (Billet, 2006). It has thus come to be accepted that an organization's employee learning strategies, programmes and policies on their own are not enough to foster a culture of employee learning. According to Armstrong (2007, p. 530) this arises from the fact that, "...organizations do not perform the actions that produce the learning; it is individual members of the organization who behave in ways that lead to it..."

In South Africa employee learning and the culture associated with it continue to be framed around Human Capital Theory (HCT) which privileges the role of the normative state and organisational initiatives. These are embedded in official statutes, policies, strategies as well as rules and regulations. The role of the employees' biographies and individual agency therefore still continues to be largely ignored (Ncgwangu, 2014). This raises questions about the efficacy of this approach and the possibilities which it creates for the cultivation of a strong culture of employee learning especially amongst low-level employees many of whom are still disadvantaged by the legacy of apartheid in terms of their ability to claim their full stake in the country's employee learning landscape and ultimately, meaningfully participate in the economy.

Based on a study at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) involving fifteen administrative assistants who deal with academic issues, this paper looks at the how biographies and individual agency mediate the administrative assistants' culture of employee learning. The administrative assistants were drawn from different faculties, departments and units across the four campuses of the institution.

Literature review

This section reviews literature related to employee learning and its attendant culture.

The culture of employee: Unpacking the concept

Rebelo and Gomes (2011, p. 173), say the culture of employee learning is a sub-culture of organisational learning which is, "...oriented towards the promotion and facilitation of workers' learning, its share and dissemination, in order to contribute to organisational development and performance." This sub-culture manifests itself in the learning activities that both groups and individuals in an organisation participate in (Vergas, 2008). It can thus be concluded that the culture of employee learning influences how employees respond to employee learning initiatives. Rebelo and Gomes (2011) assert that such responses can only be positive if the culture is characterized by social processes which encourage knowledge sharing and places emphasis on the intellectual and other personal assets which individuals bring to the learning situation.

What shapes the culture of employee learning?

Two perspectives on the basis of which employee learning and the culture characterizing it can be conceptualised are Human Capital Theory (HCT) and Critical Realism (CR). The primary concern in (HCT) is skilling employees for efficiency in productivity for greater profitability (Fitzsimons, 1999). Proponents of HCT such as Senge (1996) therefore believe that both individuals and societies learn in order to prosper.

What does HCT mean for the culture employee learning?

One of the major implications of HCT for the culture of employee learning is that where the intention by the state or any organization is to improve the performance and efficiency of workers, it has to be accompanied by a concomitant investment in their learning activities (Olaniyan & Okemakinde (2008). This implies a culture of positive intentionality on the part of the state and individual organisations to ensure employee learning. In addition, the expectation is that the higher the investment in a learning programme, the higher should be the earnings of the individuals engaged in the programme upon successful completion. This could be a source of motivation for employees, thus strengthening the culture of employee learning. The architecture of the resultant culture of employee learning thus becomes largely a linear function of the state or organisation's employee learning initiatives (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008). This, however, can be generative of tensions in the culture of employee learning in cases where there is a misalignment between the state or organisational employee learning initiatives and the employees' own learning and career development aspirations.

Critical realism: a bird's eye view of employee learning

CR advocates a holistic analysis of the historical and social contexts in which social events take place (Bhaskar, 1978). Archer (2006) identifies a cross-link amongst three components- structure, culture and agency which can be used to explain any social phenomenon.

Structure refers to those institutions which are mandated with the power to give direction to social activities (Westwood & Clegg, 2003). Structures therefore manifest themselves in the systems of interaction that occur

between members of different social groups. Jarvis (1996, p.123) says this influences both public and private behavioural patterns which themselves, “... create obligations for continuity and even reproduction.”

From a CR perspective, cultures and sub-cultures are inherently layered or hierarchical (Conner & Clawson, 2004). This calls for an analysis of the power relations amongst the different structures and the resultant culture (Archer, 2000). On this basis, the form of the culture of employee learning needs to be looked at as not just being a function of government or organizational employee learning initiatives. Rather, it needs to be conceptualized as being also a function of the complex power dynamics across different structures and how the individuals within them navigate different factors within the structures.

The role of agency in shaping the culture of employee learning

According to Archer (2000), agency refers to the mandate (and the ability to exercise it), which different social entities have to influence the activities and, therefore, the culture of a particular society. Agency can manifest itself at either the collective or individual level. At the individual level, agency is a result of identities, subjectivities and other factors such as perceptions, attitude, motivation and career aspirations (Merriam, 2001).

Billet (2006) emphasizes that understanding the contribution made by individual agency to employee learning is important for two reasons. Firstly, it allows us to appreciate the role aspects such as intentionality, subjectivity and identity in individual's cognitive growth and how they navigate the learning experience notwithstanding the influence of social factors. Secondly, it helps us to understand how the culture of such learning is made and transformed (Cole, 1998).

As a result of individual agency, Jarvis (1996) advises that there is a degree to which employee learning is so self-directed that we may not be able to decipher the role of collective agency in it. Gravett (2005, p.12) calls such forms of individual agency, the learners' *felt needs* which refers to adult learners' conscious “...wants, desires and wishes” in relation to the learning programme. As opposed to *prescribed needs* which are imposed on an individual by structures such as the state and organisations, felt needs have a bearing on the learner's approach to, and attitudes towards, employee learning. They are therefore a critical determinant of the final architecture of the culture of employee learning.

Methodology

Borrowing from Beinstein's (2000) notion of learning domains, this study conceptualised employee learning as taking place in three domains, that is, the official (normative policies, rules and regulations), social (biographies and personal factors) and pedagogic (actual learning activities). However, in its investigation, the study went beyond the official domain. It further interrogated the influence of both the social and pedagogic domains on the culture of employee learning. This was aimed at trying to more holistically establish the form of the administrative assistants' culture of employee learning. Necessarily the study adopted a qualitative methodology.

Semi-structured interviews were held with fifteen administrative assistants involved in academic work, that is, those who are at the interface of what lecturers and students' work. Purposive sampling was used to select the administrative assistants from various faculties and departments across the four campuses of UJ. The results of the interviews were recorded electronically and later transcribed.

Discussion

The discussion is based on an analysis of the common themes which emerged from the interviews with the administrative assistants.

The role of the broad social background

It was evident that most administrative assistants' career choices were a direct result of the backgrounds from which they came. For example, those administrative assistants who came from disadvantaged backgrounds reported the need to escape poverty as a motivating factor for working hard at school. This continued to influence some of them even in terms of the need to acquire further qualifications which they believed would help them to secure better jobs than the ones they were currently employed in. As one of the administrative assistants said:

From an early age I knew I had to work hard to break the poverty cycle. The message was also always being repeated to us by our parents...family elders...community leaders...basically everywhere we went. (Participant H).

What this administrative assistant said is illustrative of the notion of habitus by means of which individuals bring certain assets to any social activity. These assets play a mediatory role in the individual's navigation of the landscape of the social activity (Bourdieu, 1977).

Even though the general background has an influence on career choices and the culture of employee learning which individuals adopt, it also emerged from the interviews that there were exceptional circumstances in some of the administrative assistants' biographies to which such choices and culture could be attributed. These are unpredictable, chance or happenstance events which have a long-lasting influence on an individual's life (Schreuder & Coetzee, 2013). These events can have either negative or positive results and examples include the death of a parent or benefiting from unanticipated philanthropy. For example, one administrative assistant said the following about her background:

Umm, well ah , my mom passed away in 2002, I was in Grade Seven and she was a single parent so finances... umm.. there were no finances put aside for me to go to University and pursue what I wanted to be. Yah, I think that is what shaped my career. I went into admin because I needed to find something that would quickly get me off the ground. (Participant I)

The diligence and perseverance for engendered by happenstance events can ultimately reflected in an individual's culture of employee learning.

In some cases there was a sense of hopelessness and being resigned to one's fate induced by the belief that one's racial identity sealed one's fate in terms of employability. Bearing testimony to this was the comment that:

As I grew up, I began to realize that being a black South African meant a life of struggle right up to the end. Education matters but only to a point. I mean, I look at some of my friends, they passed, they passed matric with flying colours and they did all the so-called right courses at varsity or college but some of them are still till operators at Woolies and Pick n Pay. It's more a question of who you know than what you know (Participant L).

Administrative assistants who held such views did not seem to see much value in taking part in the employee

learning initiatives at UJ as they did not believe that such initiatives made any difference to their prospects of upward mobility in the institution

The influence of family background on employee learning

The influence of the family background on employee learning could be categorized into three types. Parents or parent figures were described as *over-demanding; supportive or had a* relationships with their children which was characterized by *avoidance*. Over-demanding parents or dominant parent figures were described as having had high expectations of the administrative assistants during their primary and secondary school years. This had two distinct effects on the administrative assistants' attitudes towards learning right up to post-school level. For some administrative assistants the pressure from such parents or guardians helped in terms of the development of positive attitudes towards learning. For, other administrative assistants, this was said to have induced dislike for learning. From the interviews, two examples were a cousin who set the academic pace and expected everyone in the extended family to follow in his footsteps thus engendering a culture of academic diligence right up to tertiary level and a mother who because of over-expectation, created negative attitudes towards science subjects and a career in nursing which she wanted her daughter to follow.

The influence of schooling background and tertiary education

Factors from the schooling background which evidently had an influence on the culture of employee learning included school type; the role of teachers; the influence of the subjects offered and co-curricular activities. For both administrative assistants who were in high school before and after 1994, school offerings reflected apartheid-era dichotomies. This inevitably had an influence on the type of education offered at these schools and unavoidably also, the administrative assistants' culture of learning post- high school. For example, one of them said:

There are a lot of things I would like to learn now that I am working but I am disadvantaged because of the school which I went to. Even though I did some courses after school, I still feel that I would be more prepared to learn these things if I had gone to one of these elite schools (Participant F).

There were, however, administrative assistants who attributed some of the competencies which they possessed at the time of the interviews directly to the type of schools which they went to. Such schools were said to have not only prepared the administrative assistants concerned for the world of work but also for any attendant work-related learning.

In all cases, the administrative assistants' tertiary education had a bearing on the culture of employee learning which they displayed. Even though there were cases in which the administrative assistants had studied courses which had no administrative components, such administrative assistants had gone on to acquire administrative skills either through personal study or the internal courses offered by UJ. It was also evident in the majority of cases that completion of post-school learning programmes in one form or another had laid the foundation for the administrative assistants' participation in the learning programmes which they were expected to take part in by the University. There were, however, those who, because their programmes of study at tertiary level were not administrative in nature, still held hopes of furthering their qualifications in those areas so that in future they could switch back to their original fields of choice.

The role of individual agency

As is argued in CR employees are not passive, but active participants in the employee learning project. In other words, they have individual agency which has its genesis in personal factors such as motivation, attitudes and perceptions.

The mediatory role of motivation

The role in the administrative assistants' mediation of the UJ employee learning project was evident in that it influenced the direction which many of them took as they engaged in work-related learning; the amount of effort which they exerted in doing so and the extent to which they were able to sustain that effort.

From some of the administrative assistants' responses to the question as to why they engaged in employee learning, a considerable level of intrinsic motivation arising from the instrumental value attached to employee learning could be identified. Such motivation could be concluded to be a positive predictor of a positive culture of employee learning. Such intrinsic motivation seemed to stem from the administrative assistants' appreciation of instrumental value of employee learning as suggested in HCT (Senge, 1996). The response below illustrates this:

It (employee learning) does contribute quite a lot sometimes. Stress management whatever it helps you to cope a little bit better with. Especially if you work as a very busy person and you have to eh with some people rushing you. I mean I don't just work for the HOD, I am working for the lecturers as well. All of them come in and ask for this and they want this and you have to you know... (Participant K).

The mediatory role of administrative assistants' perceptions and attitudes

As discussed earlier, personal factors such as attitudes and perceptions are components of the administrative assistants' individual agency. They also play a mediating role in the cultivation of a culture that encourages employee learning.

Despite the positive perceptions of the UJ employee learning project in terms of its utility value held by some administrative assistants, others had a negative towards it. There were a variety of reasons for this. Firstly, the curriculum design process was seen as non-participatory. As one of the administrative assistants said:

All we see is a list of courses which we are supposed to choose from on the intranet. Even though some of the courses are relevant to our work, they should at least consult us to find out what we want to learn. Sometimes you feel that some of the courses are a waste of money because they are a repetition of what we already know (Participant A)

Some administrative assistants expressed disappointment with the fact that all learning activities were centralised and took place at the Auckland Park Kingsway (APK) Campus. This meant that those administrative assistants who were based at other campuses always had to travel to APK to attend courses, most of the time, at their own cost. Negative perceptions of the employee learning project arising from this are productive of a weak culture of employee learning as evidenced by the fact that some of the administrative assistants had not

attended any UJ-initiated employee learning courses in more than a year. It could also be the explanation for the choice by some of the administrative assistants to engage in learning programmes offered by other institutions such as private colleges, UNISA and UTC.

The disparities which almost all the participants said existed between the time and support given by the institution for them to engage in employee learning activities compared to that given to their academic counterparts were also a source of major disappointment amongst the administrative assistants as illustrated in the following response:

Academics have their tuition paid for if they enrol for masters' or PhD programmes but we do not get that. Yet all of us work for the same university. I understand we have different conditions of service but it is still unfair (Interview with Participant A)

Those administrative assistants who showed positive attitudes towards, and perceptions of, employee learning at UJ viewed such learning as positively contributing to their goal of improved work performance. On the other hand, those who viewed it negatively also generally had negative views of the employee learning project at UJ or certain aspects of it. These two positions are respectively reflected in the following two comments:

The courses really enable me to do my work better. For example, the new system which we are now using to process marks...I wouldn't be able to use it if I had not attended the course (Participant C).

There is little focus on improvement in the performance management part of employee learning (Participant P).

For most of those administrative assistants who had been in their jobs for longer than five years, attitudes and perceptions of employee learning were characterized more by negativity than positivity. This also served to confirm that administrative assistants' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, employee learning at UJ are neither homogenous nor static. Rather, there are variations which are mainly dependent on length of time on the job and individual career aspirations as reflected in the response by one administrative assistant who said,

ITS, Iproc... all those sessions I have attended years ago! I mean they repeat the courses for the new staff. I have done time management, minute-taking strategies, PA support. I have attended a PA workshop but it's not part of UJ. (Participant K);

These comments can also be explained in terms of the conclusion that although they are shaped by socialization, perceptions differ between different individuals (Bergh & Theron, 2008).

As a result of most of the formal short courses at UJ not being credit-bearing and therefore not useful to administrative assistants in terms of promotion, some administrative assistants displayed apathy towards the courses. This can be explained in terms of the assertion that attitudes have three basic components. These are the cognitive, emotional and behavioural. The behavioural component implies that individuals do certain things in a particular way on the basis of the use value which they see in what they have to do (Berg & Theron, 2008). From the interviews it was established that many of the administrative assistants, held either conscious or unconscious attitudes towards particular employee learning programmes. For example, in respect of those programmes which were deemed to be critical to one's ability to execute their functions, one administrative assistant said,

I have to attend these courses. Otherwise I will not be able to keep up with the changes in my work. (Participant D).

According to Berg & Theron (2008) the emotional component of attitudes means that they can be conscious or

unconscious. While conscious attitudes are overtly displayed, unconscious ones lie below the surface and it may take a bit of probing or close observation to unravel them. It is therefore the balance in this dichotomy that often determines the final position that we take on a particular issue and ultimately the culture which we develop in relation to that issue particular course. This could be because of some elements within the learning environment, the quality of course facilitation or the influence of their colleagues.

Though not in a very strong way, there was indication that UJ administrative assistants have a desire to belong to communities of practice. For example, since computing packages as Microsoft Excel and Access are essential for the performance of their work, most administrative assistants said they could not do without proficiency in these packages as they would feel the odd ones amongst their colleagues. This desire to belong to a community of practice mediates the culture of employee learning in the sense that the need it indirectly forces them to engage in learning programmes from which they will acquire skills and competencies through which they will earn their right to belong to that community of practice.

Conclusion

The results of this study show the strong mediatory role played by biographies and individual agency in shaping the form of the UJ administrative assistants' culture of employee learning. Factors such as the broad social background, schooling and tertiary education background as well as aspects of individual agency such as motivation, attitudes and perception were all shown to have a bearing on this sub-culture of UJ organisational culture. Given its centrality to the institution's ability to achieve its strategic goal, the study suggests that attention be paid to the influence of biographies and individual agency on the culture of employee learning. Paying scant attention to it and focusing mainly on the normative, official strategies, programmes, policies, rules and regulations obtaining in the official domain of employee learning militates against UJ's intention to use human capital development to realise its vision of becoming a world-class university.

References

- Archer, M.S. (2006). *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M.S. (2000). *Being Human*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Armstrong, M. (2007). *A Handbook of Human Resource Management Practice*. London: Kogan Page.
- Bhaskar, R. (1978). *A Realist Theory of Science*. Brighton: Harvester.
- Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, research and critique*. Revised edition. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bergh, Z.C. and Theron, A.L. (2008) (eds.). *Psychology in the work context*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Billet, S. (2006). Relational Interdependence between Social and Individual Agency in Work and Working Life. *Mind, Culture and Activity*. 13 (1). pp. 53-69.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cole, M. (1998). Can cultural psychology help us think about diversity? *Mind, culture and Activity*. 5 (4). pp. 291-304.
- Conner, M.L. and Clawson, J.G. (eds). (2004). *Creating a Learning Culture: Strategy, Technology and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Fitzsimons, P. (1999). Human Capital Theory and Education. The Encyclopaedia of Education. London: Macmillan
- Govender, V. (2009). Promoting a culture of learning and institutionalizing a learning organization in the South African public sector. *Journal of Public Administration*. 44 (2). pp. 364-379.
- Gravett, S. (2005). Adult Learning: Designing and implementing learning events-a dialogic approach. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Jarvis, P. (1996). The Public Recognition of Lifetime Learning. *European Journal of Lifelong Learning*. 1. pp10-17.
- Merriam, S.B. (ed.) (2001). The new update on adult learning theory: New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 88. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ngcwangu, S. (2014). Skills Development in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Issues, Arguments and Contestations. In S. Vally and E. Motala. (eds) Education, Economy and Society. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press. pp. 244-263.
- Oliniyan, D.A., and Okemakinde, T. (2008). Human Capital Theory: Implications for Educational Development. *European Journal of Scientific Research*. 24 (2). pp.157-162
- Schreuder, AMG & Coetzee, M. (2013). Careers: an organisational perspective. Cape Town: Juta
- Senge, P. (2006). The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation, (2nd edtn). London: Century.
- Vergas, A. F. (2008). Creating, sustaining and growing the learning culture of a luxury hotel. Unpublished Master of Hospitality Management paper. University of Nevada, Las Vegas.
- Westhood, R and Clegg, S. The Discourse of Organisation Studies: Dissensus, Politics and Paradigms. <http://citeseerx.apsu.edu/viewdoc>. (accessed, 14 May, 2016).