

ESSENCE OF LEARNING: SOCIAL CAPITAL IN WORKPLACE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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Introduction

Toni is a highly successful small rural enterprise operator in her mid-thirties. She is well-regarded by industry groups and governments for her 'common sense', youthful entrepreneurialism and as someone who embodies the benefits of active and engaged learning through life. Let me begin this paper by posing Toni's seemingly simple question:

For so many people, they do their formal training when they are young and then their ongoing learning is simply what they learn on the job. People tend to think of their skills as the original piece of paper that they got, not this immense wealth of information that they've picked up along the way. People are often astounded when I say I don't actually have a tertiary qualification, but I've learnt an enormous amount as I've gone on. People have to *learn how to value that* and *how to make that happen*. If you want to move from job to job, *how do you transform the skills* that you've picked up on the job into something tangible that a new employer can recognise? [*italics added*]

Learning how to value ones skills and knowledge, and transforming these into new behaviours, lies at the core of effective workplace learning. But the point Toni makes illustrates the core challenge

of learning in workplaces everywhere: How do we choose which of our array of existing learnings to “transform” into productive future actions? How do we “make that happen”? This paper illustrates these *how* dimensions by explaining the role of a long-missing essence that facilitates this change – identity.

Learning occurs when interaction occurs. Interaction occurs when people engage each other, and engagement can occur in many ways. Learning from engagement can take place face-to-face. Engagement on telephones and emails is also a site for learning. Learning occurs in the engagement between a person and various kinds of texts, and when a person engages with the texts of their thoughts. In all these interactions, it is the engagement that brings to the fore the past experiences (skills and knowledge) of the interactants. Simultaneously, these often unconscious choices from past experiences are guided by two factors: (a) facets of the interactants’ identities, and (b) expectations of future scenarios that mix with identity resources to define the experiences selected. That is, the identity-shaped selection of experiences forms the essence of learning that occurs in these engagements.

Put another way, the outputs (benefits, impacts) of ‘the essence of learning’ are situationally formed and determined. Formal qualifications provide a warrant to act in some cases, while personal skills and knowledge brought together by (and embedded in) appropriate identity resources provide the motivation for action.

Since, as I discuss in this paper, the essence of learning occurs in engagements, it is in the interests of all those involved in workplace learning to understand as much about this ‘essence’ as possible.

What actually goes on when human beings muster relevant pools of their past and existing resources in engagements so as to pursue a future specific purpose? The resources to engagement, I argue here, are only partly formed from the skills and knowledge we have come to refer to as human capital. The essential resource component is, in fact, aspects of the human participants' identities. When the knowledge and skills of human resources blend at the point of engagement with the relevant components of identity resources, social capital is at once produced and built. Learning is, in these moments of engagement, the simultaneous using and building of the knowledge and identity resources from which social capital is formed.

The paper has these aims. First, I want to tease out some of the main terms used, such as learning, engagement and social capital. Second, I will illustrate the points made through reference to a workplace organisational learning event. Finally, I will bring these strands together in a discussion about the essence of learning engagement, namely the blending of physical, human and social capital in integrated human learning.

Let me now unpack these ideas.

Learning, engagement and social capital

I accept for the moment a broad notion of learning as a process of managing and producing change in individuals and their environments. These changes are articulated in the learning literature under different strands of research, only a few of which are mentioned here. They may be emphasised differently, for example, as knowledge or skills acquisition (e.g., Bloom, 1956) cognition (e.g., Bransford, 1970; Gagné, 1985), adult learning (e.g., Brookfield, 1986; Candy, 1991; Merriam,

2001; Mezirow, 1994), learning for its own inherent worth (e.g., Fauré; 1972), learning as being a member of a community of practice (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) or learning as a re-configuration of existing aspects of personal identity, knowledge and skills (e.g., Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000; Falk, 2001). In each of these emphases, learning is conceived of, and researched, differently. However, in this paper, I hone in on the latter, functional meaning for learning which, I believe, incorporates and articulates the others: that is, learning is the process of acquisition or reconfiguration of skills, knowledge and identity, which in turn assists the adoption of different roles or identities, resulting in a change in behaviour and/or a capacity to function using new knowledge, skills, values and attitudes within communities of practice.

Communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) are more than just groups of individuals learning *from* and *with* each other. They are groups of individuals where learning occurs *between* the group members. In workplaces everywhere, people interact and engage with each other and the texts and technologies of their work. Boden (1994) makes the point that the problem of recent social science has been “to treat abstract patterns of social relations as structure and everyday processes as *something else*” (p. 204, original italics). Here, read ‘communities of practice’ as ‘structure’, and ‘everyday processes’ as ‘learning engagements’. “Instead”, Boden continues, “they are one” (p. 204). That is, a community of practice and the learnings that occur within it are, in fact, mutually constituting, where “the single web of reality is woven, moment by moment, out of the practical structures of everyday life” (Boden, 1994, p. 204). That is, the views of learning in this paper are complementary to those of communities of practice, each showing a different aspect of a holistic learning environment.

The significance of the learning theory surrounding communities of practice lies as much in its implications for practice as for its abstracted account of social learning as commitment to group values and associated practices. However, the researcher's gaze has remained mainly on individuals rather than embracing the fullness of implications of learning in communities of common interest. Even when we discuss communities of practice, for example, our focus is usually still on the role of individuals within that wider group. The problem is that we understand, and rightly I believe, that the *repository* of learning outcomes lies 'in' individuals, while the *act of learning* is one of interaction – of engagement between partners in the learning act. In this paper, I ask the reader to share what it means to re-focus our gaze on the *act of learning engagement* itself rather than on the individuals who are engaging with each other.

Aspects of the learning theory outlined in this paper also resonate with Pillay's (forthcoming, 2005) discussion on distributed learning. The truth of this distribution, however, lies in *how* these distributed resources are utilised, *at what point* the resources are deployed, and *which of a larger pool of resources* are drawn on for which engagements. Learning only occurs in the act of engagement with individuals and each other, as well as the tangible, physical and inanimate objects that are implicated in the engagement, such as tables and chairs, computers and books. We all have to sit, lie, stand, walk and think somewhere, on something, in somewhere. In all these locations and social situations, we are, all the time, 'being' someone – playing a role, being a boss, being a clerk, being a female or a male, being a team player, being an engineer, displaying a particular ethnicity, doing a good job, playing the fool, displaying our identities, skills and knowledge as we do so. Engagement is the engine room of learning, and it is the place where we become someone different in subtle and not-so-subtle ways through that learning. These identity resources that emerge during

the change processes we refer to as 'learning'; in addition, the notion of identity resources provides the explanatory underpinning to 'transformational learning' (e.g., Mezirow, 1994) – when skills, knowledge and the capacity to see oneself as being and doing something differently come together and influence action.

In summary of this point, the process of engagement, I argue, is when learning occurs. Knowledge, skills and identity resources available for the learning are identified in the following paragraphs to be 'social capital'. 'Engagement' is a term I use for those meaningful interactions, also clarified in the following paragraphs, between people and organisations when learning occurs. These interactions both building and use the networks, common values and trust commonly included in the term 'social capital'.

There is some agreement in the literature as to a definition of social capital. In general terms it is agreed to refer to the social values (norms), networks and trust (Putnam, 1993) that resource a group's purposeful action. Woolcock (1998, p. 155) describes social capital as "encompassing the norms and networks facilitating collective action for mutual benefit". Portes (1998, p. 7) observes that, "whereas economic capital is in people's bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships". Others emphasise one aspect over another, for example Fukuyama (1995) focuses on trust. Beyond these broadly-based definitions, however, there are different ways in which the idea of social capital is mobilised, and I will deal with one of these that underpins the important assumption that, if social capital exists, then it must have been built. Where? How? By whom? When? Why?

These questions are addressed in research into the production and use of social capital and its relationship to learning (e.g., Balatti & Falk, 2002; Brown & Lauder, 2000; Coleman, 1988; Falk, 1997a; Falk, 1997b; Falk & Harrison, 1998; Falk & Kilpatrick, 1999; Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000; OECD, 2001a). In a real sense, this research picks up on the Portes formulation (see previous paragraphs) of social capital by finding how to get the human capital ‘out of peoples’ heads’ through social capital as resources for engagement. The research has developed a theoretical model (see Figure 1) showing how people are engaged in learning as they solved problems across differing socio-cultural situations in their everyday lives.

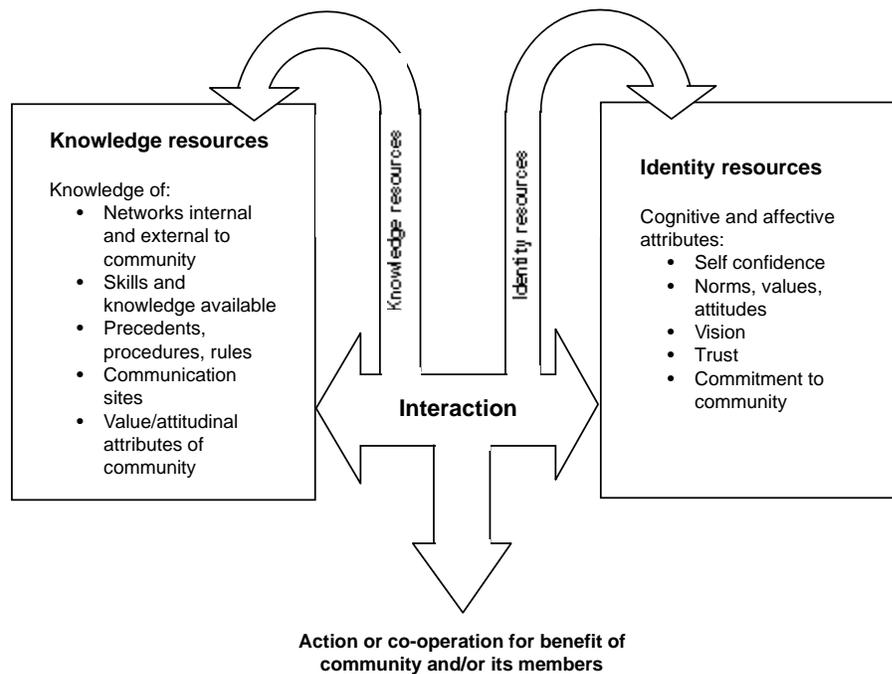


Figure 1: Building and using social capital, Falk & Kilpatrick 2000.

The learning here depends on the quality of the resources available for these people to draw on in their differing network interactions, and the resources fall into two categories: ‘knowledge’ and ‘identity’ resources. Knowledge resources include knowledge of who, when and where to go for

advice or resources and knowledge of how to get things done. Identity resources concern being able and willing to commit to purposeful action for the benefit of the community and its members, and more will be said about identity resources below.

Learning takes place while social capital is built. That is, learning occurs when the set of interactions utilizes existing knowledge and identity resources and simultaneously adds to them. 'Learning' occurs *in* the interaction/s. The three components of the model are (a) the interaction between participants, (b) the resources (social capital) potentially available to that interaction, and (c) the desired outcome of the interaction. As Balatti and Falk (2002) describe it, the

...desired outcome is the common purpose that unites and motivates the network or group (as small as two) to interact, and it is the purpose-in-hand that in fact defines the qualities of the social capital (knowledge and identity resources) drawn on in the interaction. That is, until the purpose is known and communally identified, then the constitution of the contribution of the individuals' knowledge and identity resources remains amorphous. (p. 287)

The common purpose can be under continuous negotiation, a characteristic Wenger (1998) identifies in communities of practice. The interaction can, but need not be, face-to-face (it can be a phone interaction or by electronic mail) and it can be formal (e.g., a meeting) or informal (e.g., a chance meeting over the office photocopier).

In this view of learning, identity resources are described by Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) as the "common understandings related to personal, individual and collective identities" (p. 100). Lesser

and Storck (2001) confirm the importance of the role of identity as an aspect of social capital development in workplace learning communities of practice:

...a sense of identity is important because it determines how an individual directs his or her attention. What one pays attention to is, in turn, a primary factor in learning. Therefore identity shapes the learning process. (p. 832)

The explanatory power of the Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) view of learning is, however, that it not only demonstrates that identity *is* a primary factor, but in fact shows *how* this is the case, and further, locates the *source* of its primary importance as resources-to-learning that have the capacity to be shaped so as to influence learning's impacts and benefits.

An additional benefit of the model lies in the way the common purpose for learning can be seen to influence the precise nature of the required learning resources. Balatti and Falk (2002) describe how the social capital available to the participants lies within the knowledge resources and the identity resources brought to the interaction by the participants. The specific subset of these resources used to achieve the desired outcome of any interaction that contributes to the common purpose constitutes the social capital *on and for that occasion*. That is, the social capital required for engaged learning is also situationally determined. It is likely that a different set of interactions, for a different common purpose, will draw on a different subset and configuration of available knowledge and identity resources. Therefore, Balatti and Falk (2002) find, "...mapping or measuring individual knowledge or identity attributes is of limited use without knowledge of the purpose towards which the resources are aimed" (p. 833).

So far, we have seen that the value of the social capital available to the participants in an interaction is determined by two factors: first, the match between the desired outcome and the collective knowledge and identity resources available to the interaction, and second, the nature of the interaction itself. The effectiveness of the learning interaction is determined by the situated processes that occur within the interaction and the conditions under which the interaction takes place.

As an example of how social capital is mobilised through learning, think of an instance of interaction between two people in a workplace – say a chance meeting over how to fix a jam in the new photocopier. If the ‘interaction’ shown in the horizontal bar in Figure 1 is pictured as the learning engagement for this purpose in this workplace community of practice, then it can be pictured how its outcomes (‘Action or cooperation for benefit of community and/or its members’ – the people get the jam fixed) are entirely dependent on the inputs: the quality and quantity of the resources for the action: the ‘knowledge resources’ (knowing how other copiers work, knowing how to find the directions, skill in performing similar tasks) and the ‘identity resources’ (willingness to ‘have a go’ at fixing it, self-perception as having the confidence, risk-taking, or an identity as ‘not being mechanical’) that are drawn on in those engagements.

Through the construction and reconstruction of knowledge and identity resources according to the requirements of the *collective but specific purpose* in hand (fixing the paper jam), learning has the capacity to produce wider benefits. These benefits can be for individuals (the two people get their copying done and learn to work together in the future), the workplace as a whole (the copier works

for those who follow), and for the broader socio-economy (costs involved in repairs are avoided, goodwill built in workplace horizontally and vertically). However, it is equally easy to see in this example how the wrong kinds of knowledge and identity resources being drawn on in the workplace engagement over the photocopier can produce negative outcomes for the individuals and the workplace.

The sorts of goodwill (referred to above) that appropriately resourced engagements can induce might also have spin-off benefits with social and economic impacts through what the social capital literature refers to as ‘reciprocity’. Reciprocity can, in its many forms, produce positive and sustainable outcomes, as the sense of obligation to each other gained during interactions produces direct and beneficial knowledge and identity resources for future activities. People are more likely to assist each other once interactions have provided the basis for establishing common values (norms) to which a widening group of people feel able to subscribe. One such study (Ingram & Roberts, 2000) demonstrates how cooperation between rival hotel managers results in dramatic increases to profitability. In another study, Lesser and Storck (2001) find that there are four benefits in social capital building through communities of practice: there is a decrease in the learning curve, increase in customer responsiveness, reduction in rework and preventing of reinvention, and an increase in innovation (p. 839).

However, as also suggested above, the benefits of effective learning via building social capital impact more widely than within the immediate learning community alone. In fact, the OECD (2001b) reports on an empirical analysis of “the relationships between learning (in its various forms) and economic performance at the regional level” (p. 31). One question in the OECD study

asks, “What is the importance of social capital in determining the processes of learning?” The answer to this question, in general terms, is that “[A] lack of social capital impedes learning and economic success” (p. 100). Balatti and Falk (2002) describe a study in which the impacts of learning were documented against the OECD (1982) eight indicator areas of socio-economic well-being, a framework taken up by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001). The eight areas are Health; Education and learning; Employment and the quality of working life; Time and leisure; Command over goods and services; Physical environment; Social environment and Personal safety. Impacts of learning were documented in all eight areas.

It is important to stress that the identity and knowledge resources drawn on and contributed in the interactions varies, depending on the purpose for the interactions being observed. The significance of this point for the planning of *appropriate* resources for each workplace contextualised task, each of which has a different purpose, cannot be underestimated.

The interaction of learning and context

The qualities of the knowledge and identity resources are entirely situated, in that they are shown to depend on specific socio-cultural contextual elements, shaped by what the participants in the learning interaction bring to the learning interaction in the way of knowledge and identity resources. This in turn depends on the context of their lives, including their networks, history, the communities they belong to, their values, self-esteem and the values and norms of the wider society. Learning occurs in, and is given meaning by, its particular socio-cultural context. At the same time, aspects of the context (including the purpose for the interaction) act in a reciprocal relationship with knowledge and identity resources drawn on in each and every learning occasion.

The learning that takes place in interactions depends on context, but it also impacts on context. Micro interactions have the capacity, through learning, to change the knowledge and identity resources of the individual participants. Through their networks and interactions with others, there is the potential for a 'ripple' effect from one learning interaction to impact on subsequent learning interactions involving other individuals. These other individuals may belong to other communities in the wider society, providing a channel for micro level learning interactions to impact at the level of macro social capital.

Engaging physical, human and social capital: the case of the plumber's apprentice

In order to illustrate the point of the paper, that the integration of social capital and learning theory described in the previous section provides a much-needed link between the simple existence of skills and knowledge and the availability of these attributes for the collective well-being of the workplace and the wider community, I will use the case of the plumber's apprentice (Falk, 1995). The discussion will consist of a short transcript of a learning event along with a commentary. The commentary shows how the physical, human and social capital is woven into the fabric of the interactions. It also shows how, without the social capital, the knowledge and skills are not available for wider use.

The learning event takes place between a plumber (P), a city plumbing inspector (I), and a plumber's apprentice (A). The interactions portrayed are not only between people, but also between these people and their physical contextual artifacts such as text books, gazettes and pipes. The learning is seen to draw on two sets of resources, which were described in the previous section on social capital. First, there are the skills and knowledge resources sometimes referred to as

human capital. These resources include the participants' knowledge (to a greater or lesser degree) of precedents, relevant physical objects, procedures and rules, together with some skills associated with manipulating the physical objects of 'plumbing'. However, these skills and knowledge do *not alone* constitute 'learning to be a plumber'. The second group of resources drawn on are the identity resources that the participants bring to bear in the course of the social interactions. It is these identity resources that form the vital 'missing' jigsaw pieces of learning to be a plumber.

The plumber is on a building site, and has his apprentice plumber with him. The passage opens with the plumber and his apprentice. The plumber is checking whether the apprentice has learned some material relating to drains. The Plumbing Inspector then joins them. His task is to inspect the work in progress, although he sees himself as being of some assistance to the apprentice in learning the ropes.

The by-law referred to in the transcript is in the Sewerage and Water Supply Act. Also referred to is the Australian Quality Standard A.S. 3500.2 – 1990. The Glossary of Terms is a glossary in the gazette of plumbing by-laws.

1. P Reading By-law 105, can you combine fixtures into a single discharge pipe and connect it to a DT?
2. A Not really. There is no real set out that says that it can be done. Not unless it's in By-law 82. There is no rule, no real direction at all ... is there?

3. P OK. I'd like you to read the [National] Standard 3.11, "Unvented Branch Drains".
What is the minimum size unvented branch drain you can use? You might have to use Table 6.1 to answer that.
- [The apprentice reads the Standard]
4. A We haven't got to these Standards yet. [in the technical college course]
5. P That's OK, it doesn't matter if you're right or wrong.
6. A I didn't finish reading it, so I better keep going... 8.5 metres?
7. P The length is right - 8.5 metres, but what is the minimum diameter?
8. I [Plumbing Inspector joins group] Do you want me to go away? Am I making you nervous?
9. A 40 mils, I think.
10. A [To the Inspector...] What do you reckon?
11. I Where does it say 40?
12. A I can't see 40 at all, I'm just taking a punt... Minimum size 65 mils, I'm sorry - I didn't look at the table.
13. I I can give you an interpretation of 50 mils from a fixture drain. Now I want you to look at something. The answer is 65 under the existing By-laws Unvented, connected to a vented house drain. That's the difference.
14. P [To apprentice] Were you aware of that?
15. A Yeah.
16. I Oh bullshit
17. A I'll admit; I don't even know half or a third of the By-laws.

18. I I'll give you a tip. First thing when looking for anything, look up the Glossary of Terms, and see what you're talking about, and read that. Then look for minimum sizes, "sizing", and all it says there is ... it doesn't actually give a minimum size, but it says "size of pipe", so then you say, OK, what's the minimum size of drains. That does say 65, but then to cover your tracks you have to go back and see what is your minimum size of drain, and you have to go to that section in the book [Glossary].

Discussion: Essence of engaged workplace learning: Social capital as knowledge and identity resources

Learning to be a 'plumber', in this extract, is seen as drawing on social capital resources particular to and defined by the socio-cultural context and purpose so that the process constitutes 'learning' – in this case, learning about the knowledge and identity resources of the plumbing vocation. There is the knowledge of who is important, their roles and when to take notice of them. There is knowledge of the precedents, procedures, rules and communication sites that are used for the purpose in hand. Knowledge of where to look, in what books, and the technical skills associated with extracting meaning from spoken and written texts. The transcript is clearly related to learning the knowledge and identity resources associated with 'being a plumber' and the way the knowledge and identity resources are brought to bear can be traced and documented as 'learning' in this learning event.

The learning interactions in the transcript that draw on social capital resources bring into the social sphere reference to various mediating artifacts, as Engeström (1999a, b & c) calls them. For example, turns 1, 3, 6, 12, 13 and 18 refer to the text of the By-laws and the Standards publication.

The apprentice responds to the instructions of his workmates, related to the task under discussion, both of the plumber and the inspector, especially in turns 2, 6, 12 and 17. The interspersed nature of the information gathering relevant to the purpose in hand, and its immediate application to the furtherance of answering the question posed in turn 1, punctuate the jointly constructed nature of knowledge and identity in this learning event. The construction of the meaning via the interactions is the vehicle that brings the knowledge and skills into play so that the re-formation of those attributes can be achieved as 'learning'.

Knowledge of, as well as 'learning to be', or 'being able to act out' (identity) the precedents, procedures, roles (interactional infrastructure) and social relations of 'plumbing' (values infrastructure) are equally important resources for learning in this case. The impact on the learning event when the plumbing inspector arrives is evident in, for example, turns 8 to 16. The impact on the apprentice is evident in turn 12 through the uncertainty of the response. Until turn 8, the plumber and apprentice have been answering the question posed in turn 1. From turn 11, the conversation is directed towards pipe diameters and how to find them.

One result of the analysis of the passage above is to show how, for this learning event, there is no one correct answer that can be gained from a single source. The 'right' answer is one which is socially constructed and progressively negotiated by the participants. The sense they end up sharing in common is jointly constructed by them through the conversational turns in the sequence. The outcome of this learning is finally jointly accepted by the participants as the 'right' answer. As seen in the analysis, it is through the apprentice's micro level learning interactions that his developing knowledge works in with the identity formation as 'plumber'. The 'plumber' identity is

one that the plumber himself and the plumbing inspector bring to the micro interactions from the meso and macro socio-cultural constructions of the 'plumber' identity and incumbent attributes associated with the category of a 'plumber' as enacted in this event, such as the plumbing inspector's 'tip' in turn 18. Moreover, the apprentice carries meso level identity from his technical education course context, as evidenced in turn 4 through the pronoun 'we', which indexes the coursework associated with 'being a plumber' in the macro level national plumbing Standards, made explicit in turn 3.

It is argued, therefore, that an individual's 'identity', or subjectivity, is created and recreated in the course of these everyday interactive conversations, and is created and re-created intersubjectively as the members draw upon categories of jointly understood meaning – social capital's knowledge and identity resources – as they collectively and progressively accept, create, re-accept and re-create their sense-in-common. The identity resources drawn on in the interactions are, therefore, as central to the learning processes as the knowledge and skills. Neither is it the quantity of resources alone that matters, since the above analysis shows how the *particular*, embedded and contextualised identity resources are equally responsible for what counts as workplace learning.

What does this mean for the practice of workplace learning?

I have argued that the essence of learning engagement requires the blending of physical, human and social capital in integrated human learning events. More than this, however, is the fact that the events themselves are the only opportunities for skills and knowledge to be brought into play. It is only in these opportunities for social capital to be used and built that learning occurs, because these are the times when skills and knowledge are brought out into the public arena. How many times do

you recall comments such as “I didn’t know you could do that!” – the implication being that the person’s skills and/or knowledge, as Portes (1998, p. 7) reminds us, are locked “inside their heads”. Only when the opportunities for interaction occur is it possible for the skills and knowledge to become known, and available for useful purposes.

If we are to take seriously the notion of re-focusing our gaze on the resources for engagement rather than on the individuals who are participants in the interaction, we could see value in designing learning engagements instead of, as is the case of the plumber’s apprentice, just letting them happen. From the first words of turn 18 where the Inspector says “I’ll give you a tip” we are alerted to the discrepancy between the resources needed for successful learning engagements and their actual availability for learning engagements. ‘Learning’ is often seen as a commodity that lies dormant in a single authority of some kind (a glossary, text book, computer or person) awaiting us to dig it out – or have another (teacher, trainer, facilitator) assist us in this process. The assumption here is that this knowledge is ‘true’, unitary, objective, and simply needs unlocking from its repositories. The lesson from the case of the plumber’s apprentice is that the resources for knowledge building through engagement have not been explicitly recognised or planned for. The Inspector’s “tip” points us towards the combined missing complex of resources that, in fact, no single authority holds.

There will always be a crucial role for learning of the kind found in the case of the plumber’s apprentice, but think for a moment of the pattern of such a learning event if it were to be rather more designed than serendipitous. First, defining and seeking collective commitment (via needs identification) to the specific purpose for the learning engagement would be the initial subject of

the engagement. Second, the need and purpose would then establish the required resources, including explicit identification of the skills and knowledge resources, but as well the components of identity resources and their repositories – the plumber, the Inspector, the rules and glossaries included. Third, the designed engagement would reinforce the commitment to the specific purpose-through-engagement with the defined knowledge and identity resources. Fourth, designed learning engagements would need to be monitored for their uptake of resources-for-purpose in the engagements. Slippage is likely in monitoring where more traditional repositories of ‘knowledge’ are mistakenly judged as having sole appropriateness. Rather, monitoring needs to ensure that the engagement of knowledge and identity resources combines as knowledge production in ongoing sequences of learning engagements that build to learning events.

The case of the plumber’s apprentice is one where the interactions are face-to-face, but as noted in the first part of this paper, interactions can be between all manner of other entities, such as a person interacting with people via emails, with their computer software, a book or a piece of paper. The important and central notion here is that it is the interaction that releases the so-called human capital into the public sphere where it can be put to use. Clearly, however, the qualities of those interactions, and the purposes to which they are directed, will determine the strategic component of learning for a particular workplace.

I now return to the question posed by Toni in the opening of this paper. Essentially, her question is: How do you re-value and transform existing learnings into something tangible and relevant in a different context?

When a person changes tasks within or between workplaces, they bring with them their so-called human capital skills which are locked “inside their heads”. To get it out of their heads requires interactions of some kind. The significance of this point for the planning of appropriate resources for each workplace contextualised task, where each one has a different purpose, cannot be underestimated. The issue is not one only one of providing the affordances (e.g., Billett, 2002) and hoping that engagement will follow: what precisely would be the take-home message the plumber’s apprentice received about ‘being a plumber’ from the scenario above? The issue is to design engagement opportunities so as to better facilitate the inclusion of appropriate aspects of the affordances in each purposeful engagement. This suggests the need to focus not only on the affordances, or characteristics of the individual learners (such as their knowledge or skills), but on the learning engagement as well.

The work described in this paper makes clear that each and every learning engagement will draw on more or less different sets of knowledge and identity resources as relevant to the purpose of the learning engagement of the moment. These resources will be available to a greater or lesser extent in the available affordances. By designing learning opportunities that have been analysed so as to establish the chief aspects of the knowledge and identity resources required for those purposeful learning engagements, the issue of willingness to engage, and “what one pays attention to” (Lesser & Storck, 2001, p. 832), is promoted through the mechanism of applied identity resources.

Conclusions

The essence of engagement lies in the simultaneous availability of the ‘right’ resources for the ‘right’ purpose and the ‘right’ time. In teasing out what these ‘right’ resources are, this paper has

identified the vital and often ignored group of social capital resources called here ‘identity resources’. It is only via the availability of the ‘right’ – fit-for-purpose – identity resources that learning in workplaces can be affected and effective. Yes, it is important for workers to possess the ‘right’ knowledge and skills, but, as we have seen, these can easily lie dormant, and locked up in individuals or indeed expressed through engagement in places and ways that do not benefit the organization. When the organizational capacity is taken to explicitly include the building of appropriate identity resources for the organizational purposes relevant at that time, then operationalising organisational agility becomes strategically possible.

This paper has mainly focused on the significance of learning engagements for workplaces. However, effective workplace learning engagements string together to build into learning events. Learning events can have reciprocal benefits for the workplace and their connected communities, as shown in the OECD and other literature discussed early in the paper. Additional lessons from the social capital literature lie in the benefits to be gained for enterprises by facilitating a blend of networking, values-development and trust between workplaces and outside communities, as well as within them, with all the cautions about balance and critique that the term ‘real learning’ involves.

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