

Workplace learning in changing contexts

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EDITORIAL

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This thematic issue on workplace learning is an initiative of members of the Asia-Europe Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning (ASEMLLL) Research Network on Workplace Learning <https://asemlllhub.org/>. The issue highlights examples of current research and critical tendencies in the field, drawing on the ASEMLLL networks and engaging new generation scholars in the field. The research network on Workplace Learning directs itself to the task of decoding working places as lifelong learning spaces across Europe and Asia. Workplaces exist not simply in companies and public services, but equally across a wide range of organisational and social contexts, including in the Third sector (non-profit-making NGOs, voluntary work, etc.) and in diverse forms of self-employment, including under irregular and precarious conditions. They offer very different kinds of learning opportunities – some are learning-friendly, others are less so; some provide structured work-related education and training for employees, whereas in others, learning is integrated into the flow of working processes. Therefore, the ‘learning continuum’ between formal, non-formal and informal learning is a key framework for understanding how opportunities for professional and personal development at work are distributed, structured, experienced and used.

Concepts of knowledge economies and learning societies have come to dominate public debates about the effects of labour market changes on work organisations. All kinds of learning activities which are connected to developmental processes in economies, societies and personal lives have become more and more important and even have crucial roles. Learning and adaptation capabilities are increasingly recognised as key factors and means for achieving potential.

At all life stages learning activities are important, and have special missions. But in the last three decades, as views on knowledge economies and learning societies have taken shape, learning in adulthood has become an inescapable necessity. Moreover, the impetus for expanding adult learning activities has often come from economic challenges. Notably,

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particular types of knowledge creation are commonly valued and associated with these economic challenges. Knowledge economies do not exist without knowledge and knowledge could not appear and manifest itself without learning actions, that often go beyond meeting economic needs. As a site of learning actions and knowledge creation, learning in and through workplaces has a crucial role.

Many new terms have appeared in the last three decades in the search for better understandings of the relationships between the two human processes of working and learning, in the context of organisations, economic activity and the workplaces of everyday life. At the beginning of this period workplace learning was the generally used expression. Work-based learning and work-related learning have been extensively applied in the scientific and research life, and also in practice. Recently, the debate has widened to incorporate elements of spatial analysis, through notions of the learning spaces that work entails. However, researchers still apply WPL term as an umbrella expression. The history of ideas in the field can be traced through the Sage Handbooks in the field (Malloch, Cairns, Evans, & O'Connor, 2011, 2021) and through connections with lifelong learning that are developed in the Third International Handbook of Lifelong Learning (Evans, Lee, Markowitsch, & Zukas, 2022), all of which have links of some kind with Asia-Europe networks, within wider global interests. The editors have been privileged to contribute to the developing international dialogue at a time of unprecedented global challenges.

The first paper, by Natasha Kersh and Andrea Laczik, focuses on the potential and challenges of workplace learning in higher education. The authors show how development of a practically-based higher education learning space is a more complex process than simply bringing together academic and practical learning; it involves institutional affordances, industry engagement and collaboration of key stakeholders. The contribution by Shien Chue and Rojer Säljö explores a similar domain, at the same time elaborating the perspective of socio-materiality in an exploration of how interns have to engage in boundary crossing when connecting academic learning with professional practices in the context of challenges they experience in workplaces.

The closing paragraphs of Shien Chue and Roger Säljö's paper engage with issues of 'self' and professional educators, connecting to Elina Maslo's reflections on her own workplace learning as an innovating teacher. Taking the perspective of teacher as worker in college as workplace, Maslo considers her own sense-making in the present moment in the learning spaces of teaching, seeing teaching as a process which happens together with students in the 'time development' of professional learning in complex professional learning settings.

Turning to the context of the learning that takes place in commercial companies, Andrea Gáthy-Stéber's paper inquires into informal and non-formal learning at work in the IT sector in Hungary. She finds that company-based informal learning dominates the learning patterns of employees in a knowledge-intensive industry. Informal learning is also given prominence in the paper by Justina Tan and Joel Sim. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have often been neglected in the large company bias of much workforce development research. Tan and Sim's inquiry in Singapore has found that employees' engagement in workplace learning helps to initiate and sustain employee-driven innovation (EDI) in Singapore SMEs. The findings underline the significance of workplace learning in developing and strengthening employees' innovation capacity in small and medium organisations. The findings also have implications for a wide range of work organisations in the public and third sectors as well as the private sector.



The contribution by Jay Derrick, Thijs Willems and King Wang Poon finishes the collection with a future-oriented piece on new research directions arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. As diverse forms and degrees of remote working become part of the post-pandemic 'new normal', the authors outline the effects of the pandemic, particularly remote working, in modern workplaces. How far the benefits of informal interactions can be enabled and replicated in situations of partially or wholly remote working, and what this might mean for research approaches in workplace learning, are key questions for the future.

As well as the actuality of the theme, we should emphasise that these papers illustrate the kinds of learning processes and forms which cannot be researched without close engagement in working conditions and circumstances, because of their situated nature. We ourselves have been both challenged and inspired by working as part of an Asia-Europe research network on workplace learning. We have set out in this thematic issue to bring together papers that offer some fresh angles and insights, and to illustrate how workplace learning research issues are generated in contrasting contexts. If the thematic issue stimulates you, the readers, to explore anew the changing relationships of working and learning in your own working contexts, our aims will be met. Furthermore, we will welcome you warmly to the continuing exchange of information, workshop discussions and joint studies as the Asia-Europe network builds up a shared body of knowledge on how workplace learning is provided, practised and understood in contrasting contexts.

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