

**New roles and challenges for managers as facilitators of workplace learning. Early insights from cases studied in a large state government organisation.**

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**Abstract**

The changing nature of work has created a need for workplace managers to take on roles in facilitation of ongoing workplace learning for workers. Workplace learning is often studied from the perspective of learners and workers. Workplace managers in contemporary organisations are often responsible for worker engagement and development yet few studies explore workplace learning from the perspective of workplace managers.

In this paper I outline preliminary findings from a case study designed to inquire more deeply into manager perspectives of facilitation of workplace learning.

Case findings suggest managers deploy a wide range of strategies to facilitate everyday worker learning in, through and for the workplace. I describe three emergent frames of manager facilitation and outline some of the challenges facing managers in roles as workplace learning facilitators. Interpretation of cases draws on situated learning and workplace learning principles.

**Introduction**

The nature of work and work practices in contemporary government organisations is changing to meet demands for more customer responsive systems and services. Changing business operations has created a need for workers to operate in more adaptable and flexible ways. Managers need to nurture and develop staff to learn quickly and efficiently. Opportunities are emerging for managers, who are not necessarily trainers or assessors, to take a leading role to identify and develop

opportunities to support continuous learning through everyday work practice. At the same time, there are also opportunities for organisations to develop strategies to support managers to facilitate not just workplace training, but also continuous learning through relevant and developmental work activity.

Studies in workplace learning often explore learning from the perspective of the learner worker, the trainer or from the perspective of the organisation (Marsick & Watkins 1999; Billett 2002, 2006). Few workplace learning related studies that I am aware of explore workplace learning facilitation from the perspective of a workplace manager, whose primary role is not that of a trainer, worker or learner.

The premise of this paper is that while managers may actively facilitate a range of workplace learning strategies in the context of their everyday work, the strategies they deploy and the challenges they face are not well documented and arguably not well understood by either managers or the organisation. The research uses case study methods to inquire into the actual role of the manager to describe activities and strategies deployed by managers to facilitate workplace learning. I contend that the role of the operations manager is evolving and changing in response to new demands being placed on workers and managers, and the organisation as a whole, to perform more efficiently and in a sustainable way. The context of the study is an operations manager working in a large state government organisation.

### **How workplace learning is discussed in this study**

For the purposes of this study, workplace learning is discussed in terms of processes to engage workers in activities to build their skills and knowledge, and further, to support the work of the organisation. Facilitation of workplace learning in this study is discussed in terms of actions taken by managers to guide workers through stages of thinking and acting, to learn in and from the context of work. Facilitation of workplace learning is therefore taken to mean actions and strategies deployed by managers to build worker awareness, understanding, skills and experience. The

overall aim of facilitation of workplace learning is to build worker capability and productivity through everyday work activity.

In my experience as a manager in a number of large government organisations, manager responsibilities often include roles in 'developing staff'. As a manager I have also observed that responsibility for 'developing staff' requires more than identification of skills gaps and encouragement of staff to attend organisationally funded staff training activities. Manager roles need to incorporate ongoing contextualised learning for workers with opportunity for workers to apply skills in practice. Managers need to create and maintain an environment which supports learning, guide workers through appropriate experience building activities and provide appropriate monitoring and feedback mechanisms for everyday job related activity. To prepare workers for constant change, managers, particularly with diverse teams, need to be able to deploy a wide range of strategies to support worker learning.

### **The complex nature of workplace learning**

The concept of workplace learning is often contested in how it is understood in different work settings. Hager (2006), suggests workplace learning is complex and needs to be viewed as a process of construction and reconstruction to adequately account for social, cultural and political dimensions in workplace settings. Further, Fenwick (2006) suggests, the construct of work-learning is multi-faceted consisting of a complex array of cognitive, political and biological dimensions. Such processes suggest a need to shift how organisations view work and learning.

From an organisational perspective Argyris and Schon (1996) suggest that managers can play a pivotal role in facilitating learning through inquiry to improve performance, to resolve problems and by being alert to the possibility of organisational conflicts. Some insight into how managers might contribute to organisational level learning is also provided by Schein (Argyris & Schon 1996)

who suggests leaders and managers who make learning processes part of the workplace culture, may begin the process of developing a 'learn how to learn' environment, minimising fear of failure, and maximising trust, support and reward. Similarly, Casey (1999) suggests new learning in organisations needs to be facilitated and maintained. Bierema and Eraut (2004) observe however, that while managers are increasingly expected to foster the learning of their staff, they rarely receive any training for their roles in facilitation of informal workplace learning for either individuals or groups.

Central to understanding learning at work are the ways in which workplaces invite workers to participate and how the workplace provides access to the type of guidance that is required for workers to learn (Billet 2002a; 2006). While worker participation is contingent upon the kind of experiences and interactions workers can secure from the workplace, workplaces are also contested environments (Billett 2006). As Billet suggests, however, workplace participatory practices are subject to influences of hierarchies, issue of gender, culture, interest groups and the possibility of conflicting workplace relations. This, as Billett suggests can make workplace participation a varied experience. Hughes (1999) also notes that workplace hierarchies and power relations may render the workplace fundamentally problematic as an ideal learning environment. The role of managers as 'manager', Hughes suggests, can conflict with their role as a learning facilitator when the process of learning is at odds with business objectives. A sensitive workplace learning program, Hughes suggests, would employ a learning facilitator who is relatively independent of the organisation and its interests.

The problematic nature of manager facilitation of workplace learning is further illustrated by Hughes (2004). In a study of a small group of public sector employees in their first few months of employment in administrative positions, Hughes (2004) found that supervisors had little direct involvement in facilitation of learning for their staff. The study found supervisors were only able to exercise indirect influence on worker learning through allocation of challenging tasks and accountability

measures. Supervisors were found only to ‘shape’ worker learning through creating what Kornbluh & Greene (1989 in Hughes 2000) called an ‘educative environment’ that contains pressures and incentives to encourage learning. Hughes (2004) concluded that supervisors are unlikely to be able to sustain a direct, personal or facilitative role in relation to the learning processes of staff. Supervisors, he suggests should focus, rather, on the indirect effects of their actions on the learning of staff.

Building on the concept of legitimate peripheral participation and situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger 1991) Billett (1994; 2002; 2006) suggests a situated learning model for work contexts provides a useful framework for building interactions between learners both within the work community and across community boundaries. Billett’s model combines workplace learning affordances such as frequent participation, support from a mentor and readiness of the worker and workplace to engage in learning processes. The ways in which managers might apply these types of work learning affordances is a subject of this study.

## **The study**

This paper arose from early stages of my case study research exploring the actual role of a middle level operations manager as a facilitator of workplace learning in a large state government organisation in NSW. The focus of the study is a manager with responsibility for management and development of large and diverse operational teams. To illustrate diversity, teams work in administration offices, laboratories, tool stores, maintenance workshops, hospitality, commercial kitchens, children’s centres, security, grounds, call centres, human resources, libraries, counselling and site related special projects. Teams consist of full time and part time staff, permanent, temporary and casual staff. The espoused manager role combines management, leadership, planning, organising and worker development. The study was designed to collect examples of manager perspectives in facilitating learning for others through their work and their workplaces. The primary research question asks ‘what is the role of the manager in facilitating learning at work?’

## **Method**

Semi structured interviews were conducted with five operations managers to inquire into their roles and experiences in facilitating learning for others through work. Organisational documents such as strategic plans, human resource capability development initiatives and manager position descriptions were reviewed for indications of organisational expectations of manager involvement in worker development. Semi structured interviews with organizational staff development managers were also conducted to provide a perspective on organizational level support for managers in their roles as facilitators of workplace learning, however, this aspect of the study is not included in this paper.

Cases were analysed according to themes emerging from preliminary cases. Broadly, themes included references to context, social learning, individual learning, facilitative interventions, participation, provision of opportunities, engagement by workers and constraints and challenges facing managers. Situated learning theory, adult learning and workplace learning principles provided an overall analytic framework. Identification and interpretation of themes are also influenced by my experiences as a manager and student.

## **Findings from selected cases**

A review of a range of organisational documents indicated that operations managers are expected, in several ways, to actively contribute to staff capability development, namely, but not necessarily limited to, staff in the own teams. Strategic and annual plans for example, indicate collective objectives for all staff including middle level managers, to contribute to and participate in ‘workforce development’ and ‘capability development’. Manager position descriptions include for example, references to responsibilities in provision of ‘staff training and development’ and organizational strategy documents include references to managers being ‘coaches, mentors and guides’ to others.

In interviews, managers responded to questions about how they facilitate workplace learning. They discussed their actions and engagement in workplace learning facilitation in ways which indicate three broad frames of activity. The three frames are described, for convenience, as operational, functional and strategic facilitation. Briefly, an operational frame represents learning facilitation activity which suggests managers focus on managing everyday business operations and compliance related matters. The functional frame suggests managers organise work and learning to create immediate opportunities and the strategic frame suggests managers actively identify and seek to develop longer term strategies to support worker learning.

Learning facilitation activities within these three broad frames are explained further as follows.

### **An Operational frame – managing everyday operations**

Operations managers facilitating work and learning in an operational frame tend to focus discussion on everyday operational matters and how they facilitate learning through arranging compliance related training such as occupational health and safety, vehicle driver licenses, food handling and safety certification. Learning is often referred to as training and the training is usually arranged through the staff training unit and delivered and assessed by an accredited trainer. Operations managers gather information periodically from staff about training needs and arrange for staff to attend training or a structured learning activity. While staff need to be provided with training to address compliance requirements not all training is planned for funding by the organisational staff training unit. Managers are often required to find alternative sources of funding to provide the required training.

Manager approaches to facilitation of workplace learning are primarily reactive, addressing, where possible, needs identified through data gathering exercises.

Operations managers operating in this frame talk about the need to ‘get the job done’ on time, within budget and according to relevant organisational policies.

### **A Functional frame - managing operations and identifying learning needs**

Operations managers facilitating learning in a functional frame actively seek to address work learning needs by encouraging participation in staff development training programs (non compliance related), formal course work, conferences and staff forums. Managers actively seek to ‘know’ their staff through one to one and group conversations and say they coach, mentor and guide learning through participation and engagement in work projects. Managers utilise structured training programs offered by the organisation to enable workers to use, for example, new communication tools such as web conferencing, pod casting, and blogs, online and e-learning programs. Managers also facilitate forms of experiential learning through allocation of work which they perceive will challenge others or prepare them for changes in work or the work environment.

Managers operating within this frame also discuss utilising the social networks formed among team members as a way to share skills and knowledge with each other. Managers talked about supporting learning by fostering a collaborative work environment. Some managers sought to provide physical space for social gatherings but found that lack of time, funds and motivation of team members can sometimes prevent any real progress in development of social networks. Several managers acknowledged that while social networks and learning communities are valuable for learning, they are also sometimes difficult to establish and maintain. In discussing formations of work communities, one manager observes that

*‘...it’s about creating an environment where ... communities can form and I think it’s about knowing the people’.* Mark

Less structured yet intentionally facilitated learning activities planned to provide learning opportunities include group staff meetings, job rotations, coaching, mentoring and guiding, professional conversations, networking and modelling. Some facilitative interventions were found however to be not altogether useful strategies for some cohorts of worker. As one manager explained,

*'...we do ad hoc mentoring, guiding and all that but it is ad hoc....I can't say we have our own strategies but again with the size of the staff and the fact that so many are casual and some only come in at night ...how do you engage those people...'. Olivia*

Managers operating in this frame operate in both a reactive and proactive ways to plan and manage training programs to address organisational objectives. This frame is characterised by active identification of staff learning needs and creating supportive learning environments. Managers talk about creating opportunities for learning and use of organisationally arranged training to address ongoing changes in for example, use of office or laboratory technologies, legislative requirements or to improve service levels or use of existing systems. Manager approaches to facilitating workplace learning in this frame are characterised by manager perceptions of what opportunities they think will be useful for others given current circumstances.

### **A Strategic frame – managing learning for longer term planning**

Managers operating in this frame combine reactive and ad hoc learning strategies with longer term strategic plans for staff learning. The facilitation process includes identification of work learning needs to meet current and some anticipated future job requirements through work and job design, providing work related developmental opportunities and encouraging participation in training programs.

Managers operating in this frame refer to linking their strategies with organisational business plans or organisation wide staff development strategies. As an example, one manager indicated:

*'...we are looking at some change management issues in a particular area...some of these things relate directly back to our vision statement' and further*

*'...I'd like to have an active discussion in terms of leadership aspects or their professional development... to talk conceptually in terms of development....'.* Chris

### **Summing up manager roles and challenges for facilitating workplace learning**

Constant change in the workplace appeared to drive managers to find ways to more efficiently distribute work and to engender a culture of 'learn to learn' among staff to keep up with the pace of change. Implementation of new systems, policies and procedures and increasing demands on manager time appear to contribute to creating a need for more effective utilisation of resources and facilitation of on-the-job workplace learning for team members.

The recent introduction of a performance development scheme has created a new demand for managers to offer more structured facilitative learning interventions such as mentoring, coaching and guiding to assist workers to develop and improve their performance. Managers noted however, difficulty in engaging some staff in discussions about individual learning and development needs. Managers note that the extensive commitment, time and energy required to facilitate learning using facilitative interventions is inhibitive for both the manager and worker. This raised number of issues for managers about both the process of managing individualised learning and facilitation processes through structured interventions like mentoring and coaching, for large teams of workers.

Continuous and sometimes incomplete staff restructuring was also cited as a reason for the need for facilitation of workplace learning. Identified gaps in essential staff skills such as using communication tools and office software were also driving the need for continual identification of staff learning needs and encouragement to attend formal training programs. Increases in e-learning technologies also require that managers model the use of new workplace languages and communications tools to ensure staff communicate effectively in the new work environment.

Cases indicate that many of the learning strategies deployed by managers include individualised and collective learning strategies focused on developing both short and longer term staff capabilities. Managers also indicated that in order to facilitate learning for others it is necessary for them to 'know' their staff and to foster a safe, collaborative work environment. Social networking and sharing skills among team members are effective and sustainable ways to facilitate worker learning. However, challenges encountered by managers in most cases primarily included lack of manager time to address individual or group learning needs, concern about lack of engagement of workers in learning processes and the impact of continuously changing systems and procedures. A key concern for managers was a perceived under-acknowledgement at an organisational level of their role as a facilitator of workplace learning.

Overall, operations manager approaches to facilitating learning tend to be reactive to prevailing organisational needs and policy development. Evidence also suggests managers rely greatly on good will and informal sharing among staff to support continuous on-the-job skills and knowledge development. Workplace learning facilitation strategies deployed tend, however, to be somewhat ad hoc.

Manager activity in each of these frames may be viewed as making a contribution to organisational learning through attempts to address individual learning needs, the

outcomes of which could contribute to building collective memory and organisational knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

Preliminary analysis of cases studied has provided first indications of the actions of operations managers and their perception of their own role as facilitators of workplace learning. The impact of continuous change in work and the need for sustainable approaches to workplace learning appear to be leading managers to deploy a range of facilitative learning strategies to support everyday work and learning. Cases indicate manager roles extend beyond provision of workplace 'training' to develop staff. Managers appear to be taking on a variety of roles in identification of longer term learning needs and facilitation of ongoing contextualised learning through a range of participatory practices to develop staff. The cases indicate managers actively deployed a range of situated learning and workplace learning affordances (Billett 2006) such as access to social networks and facilitative interventions including mentoring and coaching to develop capabilities among workers and to prepare workers to meet new challenges. The three facilitative frames illustrate diversity in roles and some versatility in attempts to facilitate workplace learning for others.

Evidence suggests that managers not only identify and facilitate training for workers, they also actively seek to incorporate facilitative interventions for learning into everyday work in attempts to develop worker skills and experience in an effective and sustainable way. Despite the range of challenges faced by managers they continue to deploy strategies to facilitate on-the-job learning and are generally cognisant of the need to develop longer term learning strategies for workers as individuals and in the interests of the organisation. A key acknowledgement by managers is that in order to effectively facilitate learning among staff, they firstly to 'know their staff'. In line with this, managers talked about learning strategies to

build communication and social networking which, together, assist the process of building relationships between workers and between workers and managers.

In alignment with Hughes (2004) suggestion that workplace supervisors should focus on the indirect effects of their actions as learning facilitators, the cases studied indicate that managers actively seek to create an 'educative environment' to shape the learning of others through challenging tasks, engendering participation and creating opportunities. Cases also indicate that managers consider aspects of facilitating workplace learning as challenging and somewhat problematic, however, continue to identify and attempt to address ongoing learning needs using the resources available. The cases studied to date however, suggest a need for further inquiry into how ongoing everyday workplace learning is viewed, constructed and facilitated by managers, workers and their respective organisations.

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