



Journal of Workplace Learning

Emerald Article: A model for learning in working life

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Article information:

To cite this document: Knud Illeris, (2004), "A model for learning in working life", Journal of Workplace Learning, Vol. 16 Iss: 8 pp. 431 - 441

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/13665620410566405>

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A model for learning in working life

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Keywords *Workplace learning, Learning, Working practices, Work identity*

Abstract *The aim of this article is to develop a holistic model that shows the basic elements of workplace learning and their mutual connections. This is done by adjusting and combining two models that have already been worked out formerly by members of the consortium: a model dealing with the workplace as a learning space, and a general model of the learning process. The most important features of the new model are its distinction between the social and the individual levels of learning, and its pointing to the overlap between the working practice of the organisation and the work identities of the employees as the central area for important workplace learning. Concludes by discussing the purposes to which this model can be put.*

Workplace learning

In this article I shall present a model for learning in working life that was developed in the workplace learning consortium by combining a general model for learning and a model for learning at the workplace, both constructed by members of the consortium on earlier occasions.

We have been using the very broad and open term “working life” to underline that work-related learning to an increasing extent does not only take place at the workplace alone, but also, for example, at courses, in networks and exchange schemes, in contacts with customers, users and suppliers, under trade unions, in industrial organisations and in more private work-related contexts. However, it is clear that the workplace learning is still of central importance, and the construction process therefore takes its point of departure in the model for learning at the workplace (Figure 1), developed by Jørgensen and Warring (2001), and here reproduced with some minor changes for the purpose of the combination that will be made later.

This model basically operates with the concepts of learning environment and learning processes. Learning in the workplace takes place in the encounter between the learning environments of the workplace and the employees’ learning processes. By the concept of learning environment, Jørgensen and Warring understand the opportunities for learning contained in the material and social surroundings. By the concept of learning processes they understand the life of the individual as a continuous learning process that builds on the complex experiences of the previous life course and which is given direction by the forward-looking life plan and future perspectives. The learning process is decisive for the readiness for learning with which the individual and groups meet and exploit the opportunities for learning in the learning environments. Learning takes place in a dynamic relation between the employees’ learning processes, the communities at the workplace and the enterprise as technical-organisational system.

On this background the triangular model is set up between the three main components in workplace learning: the technical-organisational learning environment, the social learning environment, and the employees’ work processes. The division between the two sides of the learning environment is important because essentially



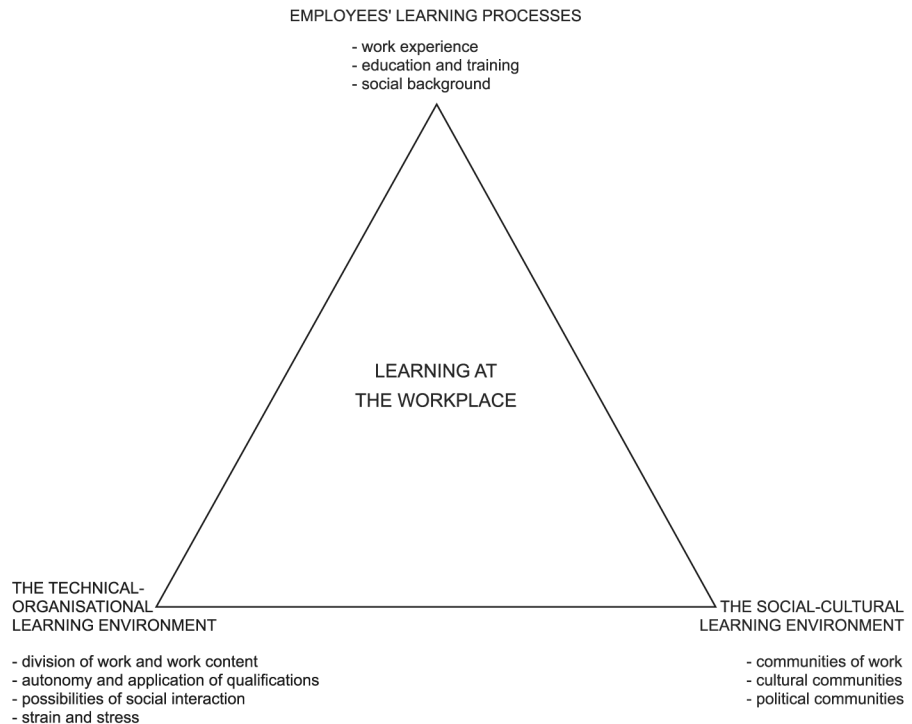


Figure 1.
A model for learning at the workplace

different dynamics determine the development in each of them. In relation to the technical-organisational environment it is primarily market and technological conditions that determine the conditions for learning. In relation to the social learning environment, it is in particular social and cultural matters that are important for learning possibilities.

However, the learning environment only comprises the framework for learning, while it is in the interaction between the individual employee and the learning environment that learning occurs. This is why it is necessary to analyse the employees' background, experience and future perspectives in order to understand the dynamism in the encounter between learning environment and learning processes. The individual elements in the model function in a dynamic relation to each other. For example, the learning process of the individual employee is closely interwoven with the development in the social learning environment. They can only be separated out as disconnected elements analytically.

In the same way as learning in the workplace must be understood as a dynamic relationship between the different elements in the model, the elements are in turn dependant on a number of matters at the societal level. The technical-organisational and the social learning environment at the workplace must be understood in connection with matters extraneous to the individual place of work, e.g. market, political-institutional, social and cultural conditions in society. Likewise, for the employee the workplace is just one of many other environments for life and learning.

In the model each of the three elements is described by a few features that are important in relation to learning, and it is at the same time emphasised that in different ways they are related to a wider societal context: the learning processes through the individuals' experience and position in society, the environments by virtue of their being formed by societal conditions.

In order to go on with the model construction it is important to observe, not only that all of the three elements are in constant interaction with each other, but also that there are two different kinds of interaction involved. On the environmental or social level – along the base line of the model – there is a mingling of the two types of environment (as already stated they can only be separated analytically). And in the vertical dimension of the model there is a constant interplay between this mingling and the individuals' learning processes. The field where these two main interactions meet – graphically around the middle of the base line – could be pointed out as the area of working practice from which workplace learning is developed. This means that whenever learning takes place at the workplace it is inevitably, directly or indirectly, influenced by the fundamental way in which working life is organised and functions in society. The model for the conditions for working life looks like Figure 2.

With this model we are attempting to illustrate the fact that the learning that takes place in working life and at the workplace originates in the technical-organisational and social conditions in which the employees are involved and which, with the concrete form they have in the individual case, are always fundamentally influenced by the position and function of working life in the society in question. In order to characterise this, we make use of the practice concept which has been widely developed in many contexts over the last few decades (e.g. Bourdieu, 1998; Lave and Wenger, 1991), and which not only characterises that which takes place “in practice”, but also this practice as a constituent instance for, *inter alia*, human consciousness, identity and learning.

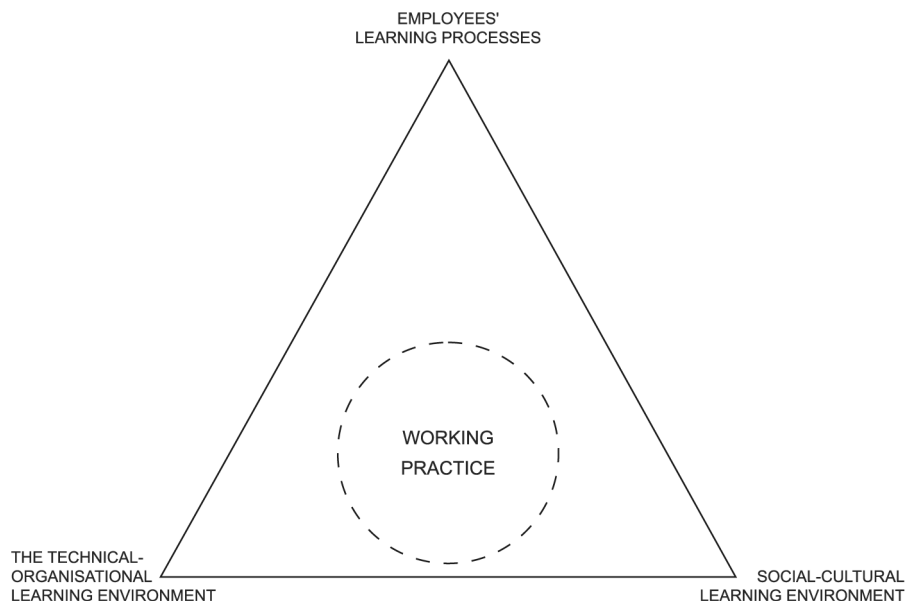


Figure 2.
The conditions of working life for learning

What is learning?

In the above, the focus was directed towards ways in which working life may be understood as a space for learning. The next step directs the perspective in the opposite direction, to the ways in which human learning processes unfold and how they interact with the conditions offered by working life.

At the outset, however, I shall have to provide a more precise definition of the learning concept that forms the basis of our work, because the perception of what learning is and may be has developed in many directions in recent years, not least as concerns learning in working life, where today we often come across terms such as “collective learning” and “the learning organisation”.

Traditionally, learning has been defined as the process through which an individual acquires knowledge, skills and possibly also attitudes and opinions, and professionally it has been considered as belonging to the field of cognitive psychology, together with areas like the senses, reasoning and memory. However, in recent decades, several commentators have called this view into question.

First and foremost it has been maintained that learning is fundamentally to be viewed as a social process that takes place in the interaction between people, for instance in various communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), or more generally and exclusively in terms of the so-called social-constructionist view (Gergen, 1994; Burr, 1995). In extension of this, a discussion is conducted on the question of whether the ability to learn is the exclusive ability of individuals, or whether it might be said that also groups, corporations, organisations and perhaps even nations have this ability.

In my opinion both the traditional view that learning is an inner psychological process within the individual, the view maintained by classical learning psychology, and the view that learning is exclusively a social process, as maintained by the social constructionists, lead to erroneous conclusions. On the contrary, the point is that human learning always involves both elements at one and the same time: through the social interaction between the individual and his or her environment, the individual receives many influences or impulses which he or she may absorb through inner psychological interpretation and acquisition processes. Only if both the interplay processes and the acquisition processes are active does learning take place (Illeris, 2002).

This means there is always a form of direct or indirect interplay, sociality, fellowship or collectivity involved in the learning processes: even when an individual is alone in a current situation, the influences received from the environment are socially co-determined, and if the influence is mediated through reading, electronic media, images, architecture, etc., one or more specific influences are also indirectly present.

Therefore one might say, with Lave and Wenger (1991), that all learning is situated, i.e. it takes place in a specific situation or context that is co-determinant for both the learning process and its outcome, and it also makes immediate sense to refer to social learning or the social dimension of learning.

On the other hand, it is only in very special contexts that one might speak of collective learning if one defines collective learning as several individuals in a given situation learning the same thing. This is because the individual psychological acquisition process has the character of a union between the current impulses and the results of previous learning, and even though the impulses may be the same, e.g. for all

participants in a tuition situation, there will be individual differences in what has previously been learned, unless the group of people in question have highly similar prior knowledge (like members of a religious sect or adherents of a certain ideology may have in areas crucial to their defining tenets).

However, it is not possible on the basis of the definition outlined to speak of “the learning organisation”, or similar expressions. The social interplay processes and the psychological acquisition processes which learning consists of involve some capacities which living beings, and especially humans, have acquired and refined through millions of years, and which, e.g. not even the most advanced computers are able to replicate, because human learning is much more than mere functional acquisition and processing of information. Human learning also involves complicated patterns of motivation, understanding, meaning, emotions, blockings, defence, resistance, consciousness and subconsciousness, and it is something entirely different from the incorporation and application of information and functions that a computer or an organisation is capable of (however, the computer is able, e.g. to process massive reams of data in a short space of time, and the organisation may, through the co-operation of many people and the use of instruments, perform tasks on a scale and magnitude which an individual would never be able to match).

In summary, the basis for our understanding of learning is thus that it involves specifically human processes (which only on certain points resemble features found in more highly developed animal species), which include both social interplay and individual psychological processing and acquisition. There may well be joint or social learning processes, but only in special cases will the outcomes be the same for all involved to an extent that permits the use of the term collective learning.

It is furthermore fundamental that both rational and emotional elements in the broadest sense are involved in learning, and that psychological phenomena like blockings, distortions, defence, resistance, and similar factors may play a role in the learning process.

As a parallel to the general model for working life as a space for learning, which was introduced before, I have previously developed a general learning model on the basis of the view of learning outlined above. The model was first developed in my book *The Three Dimensions of Learning* (Illeris, 2002), and has since been summarised, defined in further detail and related more specifically to different contexts in a number of other texts (e.g. Illeris, 2003a, b).

This model includes the social interaction process of learning as a vertical double arrow between the individual and his or her environment (Figure 3). The environment is placed at the bottom (at the social level) and the individual at the top (at the individual level). On the individual level we also find the psychological acquisition process as a horizontal double arrow between the learning content aspect (about knowledge and skills etc.) and the dynamic aspect (about motivations and emotions etc.).

In this way, the double arrows stretch out a triangle with an angle downwards to the social level and two angles at the top on the individual level, constituted by the content and the dynamic elements, respectively, in the subjective processing and acquisition. The message of the model is thus that human learning is always composed of two co-determinant processes and includes three dimensions that may be termed the social, the content and the dynamic dimensions.

Learning, identity and working life

In summary, the interaction process that constantly takes place (the vertical double arrow) develops a continuous flow of impulses through which learning in working life is generally achieved, for instance opinions, explanations, behavioural patterns, impressions, perceptions, etc. which employees may receive in a number of different ways. The pivotal point of learning thus lies in the way in which the impulses of working life or the community of practice are handled in the individual acquisition process (the horizontal double arrow). This handling lies in the transition between the two double arrows, in an area which in relation to working life – and in parallel to the field of working practice defined earlier in this article – could be pointed out as the individual work identity.

Identity is always both an individual, biographical identity: an experience of a coherent individuality and a coherent life course, and at the same time a social, societal identity: an experience of a certain position in the social community (Illeris, 2003c; Erikson, 1968). Thus the work identity should be understood as a partial identity, concerned with our experience of ourselves as working individuals and as parts of a working fellowship (cf. Andersen *et al.*, 1994, p. 52ff).

The model in Figure 3, when related to working life, therefore looks as Figure 4. The central point of this figure is that the learning impulses that concern working life on the one hand are influenced by our work identity, and on the other hand also plays a part in influencing and developing this work identity. This is where the individual side of learning in working life is decisively shaped, while the social and societal side is decisively shaped in the practice field, as it was illustrated earlier in Figure 2.

It should be noted here that other researchers might use the concept of “habitus”, developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). This

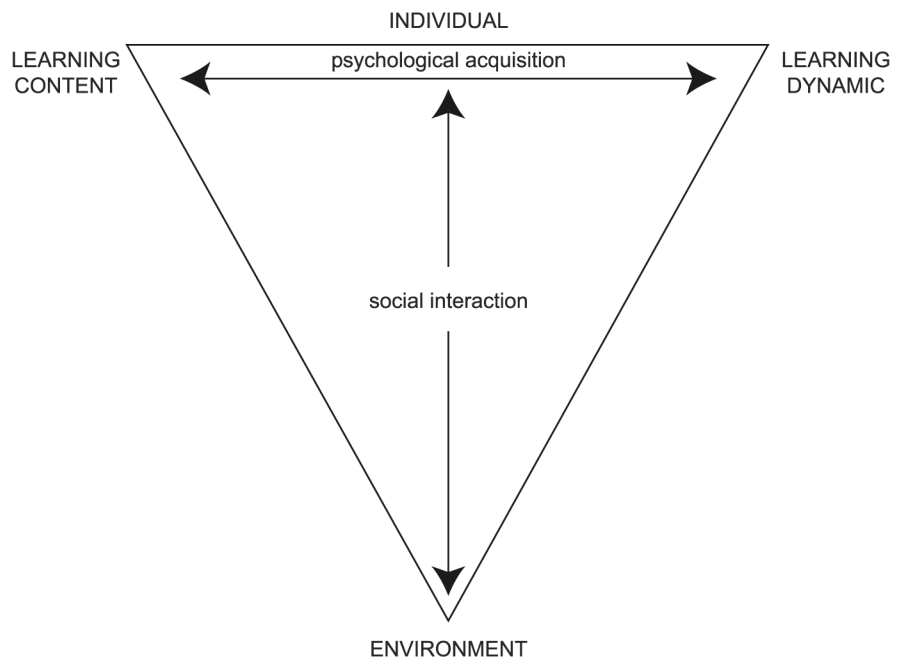


Figure 3.
The processes and dimensions of learning

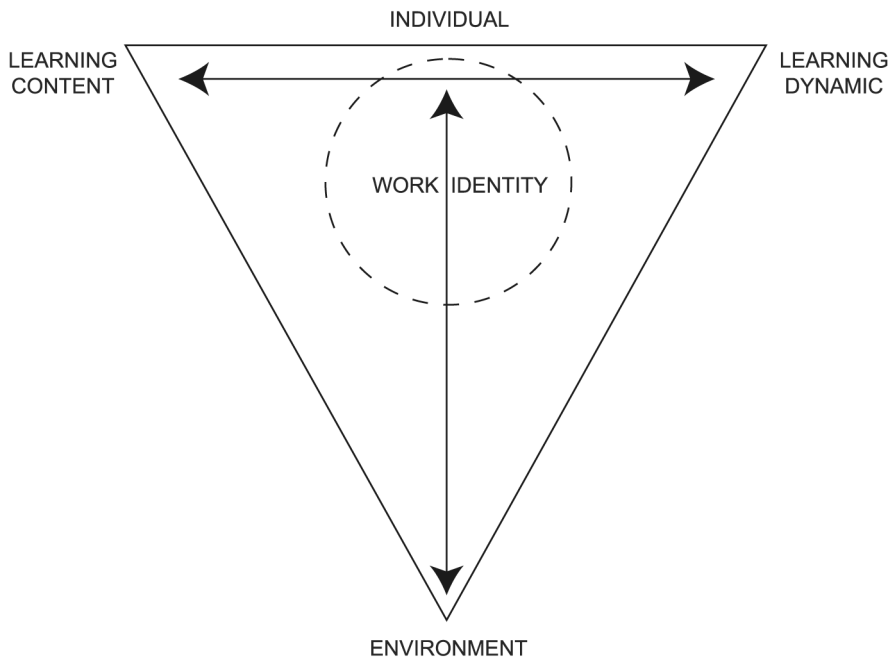


Figure 4.
Learning and identity in working life

applies to, among other things, considerable parts of British research on learning in working life (e.g. Hodkinson *et al.*, 2004). However, we have chosen the concept of identity for several reasons. First, the word “identity” is more immediately known and used in common language, while “habitus” is a rather less easily accessible academic concept. Second, identity is a predominantly psychological concept (especially developed within psychology by the American Erik Erikson, 1968), which is concerned with the way in which the individual perceives him or her self and how he/she perceives being perceived by others, while habitus is a sociological concept, concerned with the way in which the cultural and societal matters with which the individual has been confronted are deposited in the individual. In Figure 4 work identity is specifically located on the individual level. Third, there is a tendency to refer to identity as something on the basis of which we actively think and act (and learn), while habitus is to a greater extent used for referring to something which is done to the individual and which lies outside the individual’s control (which may of course also have an impact on learning).

However, there would actually not have been anything preventing the use of the concept of habitus, and I shall later consider the relationship between identity and practice somewhat along the lines of Bourdieu’s treatment of the relationship between habitus and practice.

A holistic model

Up to now I have been dealing with learning from a workplace and a general learning perspective, respectively. I have introduced two different models and elaborated them with a view to being in a position to join them together in a holistic model (Figure 5).

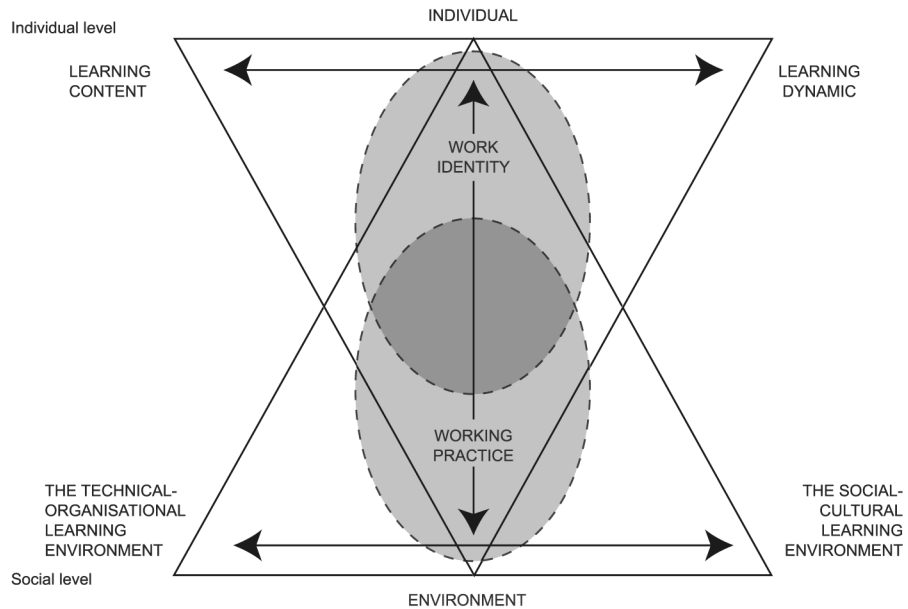


Figure 5.
Learning in working life

The joint model is constructed in such a way that the two triangular models from Figures 2 and 4 have been superimposed on each other. The first of the two models (the conditions of working life for learning) has its base line on the social and environmental level at the bottom of the model, while the third angle that has to do with the employees' learning processes points up into the individual level. On the other hand, the general learning model (learning and identity in working life) has its base line on the individual level with an angle down into the social level.

It is thus a fundamental condition that the model both tries to distinguish between and connect together the individual and social levels of learning in working life. When depicted in a model the impression can be that the connection between the two levels is of an external and mechanical nature, but that is certainly not the case. It is therefore important to emphasise that in the world of reality it is a matter of a dialectical whole between the subjective and the objective, i.e. an interaction between two connected levels that mutually contain and presuppose each other. The objective environment is present in the subjective experience and understanding and is simultaneously marked by subjective perceptions and actions. It is a matter of integrated processes of subjectivisation and societalisation in a continuous interaction that can only be disentangled analytically (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1969).

The model captures this dialectic by overlapping between the two triangles, and first and foremost between their central elements: working practice in the first model and working identity in the second model, respectively. It is precisely in the overlapping between these two elements that the important interaction takes place. Everything to do with working life as a social and societal learning space, ranging from the technical-organisational to the social-cultural learning environment, concentrate in a working practice. In the same way the different dimensions of

learning in connection with working life collect together in the learners' working identities.

This means that no matter what influences are present in the learning space, whether they are linked to the performance of the work itself, or to the workplace, or to working life more generally, they are marked by the working practice that the learners experience and are part of, and they are filtered through the individual learner's work identity to become something that he or she processes and acquires as learning. At the same time they influence the employees' individual and common perception and relation to everything that takes place at the workplace, and thereby also the way in which the workplace functions and develops as a learning space and as a place for work and production.

In the figure I have therefore chosen to emphasise this central overlap between working practice and working identity by shading it. It is here that the most important factors in connection with learning in working life take place. It is here that learning obtains its special character of being workplace learning, here that the employees' identities influence and develop the practice of the community, and the community's practice forms the individual working identity, and learning takes on its specific character of learning in working life. Hodkinson *et al.* (2004) emphasise that it is not sufficient to understand the relationship as "two separate entities, 'mind' and 'social world' that are logically separate but inter-related" but it is (quoting Brown *et al.*, 1989) the case that "learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world" (Hodkinson *et al.*, 2004).

At the same time it should also be noted, as can be seen from the figure, that more peripheral learning can also take place in working life that occurs circumventing the central common field and is more general and less work related in nature. I have been careful to draw up the model so that the practice and identity fields do not go right out to the sides of the triangles in order to mark that in working life also learning processes can take place which to a lesser extent, or even not at all, are influenced by these central matters.

This is why, on the left of the model, I have placed the technical-organisational learning environment and the content side of the individual learning, respectively, in a way that shows that in working life there is also room for acquiring, for example, technical-practical understandings and skills that are not specifically linked to work practice and working identities, such as general methods of calculation and general technical or mathematical modes of understanding.

And correspondingly, on the right side of the model I have placed the social-cultural learning environment and the dynamic side of the individual learning, respectively, so that there is room for more general learning about personal, social and cultural matters that are not necessarily particularly related to the workplace in question.

But direct, vertical connections are not possible, neither on the left nor the right of the model, because even though it might be learning that does not go in over the very character of the work practice or the working identities, all learning in working life will to a certain extent be marked by the fact that it is there precisely it takes place, there it is situated. And if the learning is more crosscutting in nature implicating both sides of the model, of necessity it will also come in over the central fields.

The status of the model

In the above I have given an account of the way in which the model in Figure 5 was thought out and constructed. But what is the intention of such a model and what can it be used for?

A model such as this must be understood first and foremost as a simplified and systematised way of providing some overview of what the constructor regards as the most central elements, fields and processes that are at play in connection with learning in working life and their mutual connections. Both learning and working life are some quite complicated areas to which to relate, and when they are brought together they give a very high degree of complexity that one can try to manage or obtain an overview of in many different ways.

Any method will of necessity have the character of adopting a certain perspective, a certain point of view that will draw some certain matters into the foreground. A characteristic trend in current societal and political thinking and exercise of power is that there is a lot of one-sided focus on economic viewpoints, and that, *inter alia*, attempts are made to also control the organisation and content of research from these points of departure.

With this model I primarily wish to illustrate a learning oriented perspective on working life, but this can be done in many different ways and is, naturally a choice on my part – a choice I can substantiate on the basis of learning theory and understandings of working life – that I do so because I regard the dialectics between the social and the individual spheres as the most central feature of learning in working life. It is, *inter alia*, my opinion that the economic rationales that mainly form the basis of management and organisational theory are inadequate in this area because they do not incorporate precisely the social and individual conditions that are of crucial importance in connection with both learning and working life, for example typically matters connected to motivation that have to do with much more than economic incentives.

The perspective from which I have worked out the model also implies that it does not directly depict the societal and economic framework conditions that apply to learning in working life. I am, of course, aware that these matters are very important, but my task here has first and foremost been to examine the matters to do with learning, and learning is only indirectly dependent on economy.

Thus, in general the model must primarily be understood as a way of providing a certain overview while at the same time indicating what may be considered as the most important elements, features and relations in the field. The model is in the nature of a map, and like a map it can be used to indicate different elements in relation to each other but also to manoeuvre by.

Three double arrows are placed in the model identifying key lines of connection or interaction. The horizontal double arrow illustrates the central dialectical interaction between the social and the individual level. The uppermost vertical double arrow indicates the interaction on the individual learning level between the content side and the dynamic side or, as it is often expressed, between cognition and emotion, in the individual acquisition process. And the double arrow at the bottom indicates correspondingly the interaction between the technical-organisational and social cultural sides of the working life learning environment.

But if one examines a concrete learning process – whether it be in connection with analysis and discussion of a specific learning course or event or in connection with planning various measures, many connections can be drawn in all directions in the model. In this context the model can function to provide an overview as a kind of checklist of different key matters that are at play, and as a guide pointing out the areas one comes through and the elements to which one must relate.

Finally, one should not read more into the model than that it was intended and drawn up as an auxiliary tool. It can be used to support one's perception in the context of planning, implementing and evaluating learning processes, undertakings and measures in working life, precisely to the extent that one thinks it can be of help in the specific case. And it does not postulate that matters are so, but only that one can choose to view them in this way.

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