

# Workplace Learning. A Proposed Typology to Facilitate Transfer from Situated Learning

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**Abstract:** Learning is a phenomenon that takes place constantly. It is envisaged that capitalizing on its effects to possibly enhance performance is a desirable outcome for organisations. Following the introduction of the Situated Learning Transfer Model, and a review of the relevant literature, a new typology emerged. One of the primary aims of the proposed typology is to make informal learning visible and arguably more transferable. This could possibly be a step to support transfer from situated learning to the workplace. The typology identifies the contextual factors that can potentially enhance or inhibit transfer from situated learning. To date, research in the area of learning focused mainly on formal learning. The proposed typology could make a valid contribution to research, policy and practice through its focus on informal learning. It must be noted that transfer of learning climate is heavily embedded and, to a large extent, implicit in the typology through different elements that constitute the workplace environment directly and indirectly. The typology may pave the way for new opportunities to capitalize on learning through the consideration of three main factors, namely, instances of learning, organisational enhancers of transfer from situated learning, and contextual elements. Through the proposed typology it is hoped that this theory building exercise can help fellow researchers to pursue their projects in further understanding learning and its management in organisations. Further research is required to refine and test the typology.

**Keywords:** typology, informal learning, situated transfer, organisations

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## 1. Introduction

Learning takes place all the time in different contexts (Tracey et al. 1995). It is therefore not surprising that the workplace may also present a rich environment where learning can take place (Eraut, 2004) with informal learning being acknowledged as an important catalyst for development in organisations (de Laat, and Schreurs, 2013). Forrester and McTigue (2004) acknowledge that workplace learning has different meanings that feature under different guises including apprenticeships and professional education. For the purposes of this paper, workplace learning is understood to refer to the acquisition of knowledge in the workplace. In their work Stern and Sommerland (1999:1) claimed that workplace learning acquired visibility and saliency because it “sits at the juncture of new thinking concerning the nature of learning about the modern enterprise in a global economy”. This notion instigated an investigation in how learning in situ could be exploited to inform and benefit organisations. Cognizant that situated learning provides opportunities to create meaning from real life events and activities in our daily living (Stein, 1998) the Situated Learning Transfer Model (SLT) was outlined in a separate paper aiming to explore the factors that influence the transfer of learning in situated conditions in the workplace. In this paper first, an outline of the SLT model is provided. Secondly the typology for workplace learning will be presented.

## 2. Background

Searching the extant body of literature, it is understood that situated learning through its spontaneity takes place in workplace environments too (Billett, 2001, Eraut, 2000). Studies show that there is a link between workplace learning and growth through professional development when engaging with the work context (Lave, 2012). Jacobs and Park (2009) define workplace learning as a process where individuals engage with learning opportunities both formal and informal to gain new skills to support on the job practices. This differs from situated learning which takes the form of informal acquisition through social activities. Through the practice of situated learning, knowledge is constructed in situ through social interaction with fellow individuals and also within the organizational context (McLellan, 1996). More specifically, Lave and Wenger (1991) stated that learning takes place while contextually engaging with situations involving communities of practice. Taking this background into consideration, one may deduce that learning on the job could equate with professional development since know-how is acquired through situated learning.

Echoing work by Lave and Wenger, Boud and Hager (2012) argue that the process involves active participation through which knowledge is located, constructed and improved through routine activities. Marsick and Volpe (1999:4) state that the value of informal learning is ‘predominantly experiential and non-institutional’ while Billet, (2001) claims that norms, values and common practices themselves provide a structure for workplace

learning experiences. Viewing learning as situated. Raz and Fadlon (2005) state that meaning is embedded and highly contextualised while the knowledge that is transmitted is not entirely 'objective'. It follows that in such a social context, knowledge could therefore be imbued with influences from the social environment, habits and the community where it is taking place. This is supported by a claim made by Edmondson (1999) stating that knowledge is embedded in interactions and shared beliefs.

The cultural and structural characteristics of the organisation may shape the 'learning landscape' and impact the effectiveness of the application of situated learning. Lave, (1990) refers to structure as the 'learning curriculum', emphasising the difference from a teaching curriculum, as learning takes place in a social context through engagement and co-participation in real activities with other members of the workplace community. Gherardi et al (1998) introduce the concept of the 'situated curriculum' which is embedded in the habits and traditions of the community. Although best practice methods regarding what conditions 'prompt access and utilisation for learning' are yet to be fully understood (Marsick, 1994:28), much research has been conducted with the aim of exploiting and utilizing better the knowledge residing and created in organisations. Processes and routines within the organisation could provide fertile grounds for situated learning that individuals unknowingly tap into.

### **2.1 The Situated Learning Transfer Model**

The SLT model (Fig.1) builds on existing models primarily on Boud and Walker (1990 and Holton (1996). The different components of the model represent factors that may have on instances of learning transfer. Transfer refers to the application of acquired knowledge to real life situations defined by Rijdt et al. (2013) as the generalization of application of skills and knowledge acquired to the workplace. Identifying in which area(s) of the firm the learning resides and finding out how to make this learning transferable is the ultimate aim of the model and the proposed typology. Notwithstanding the name 'situated learning transfer model', it must be noted that the learning addressed is not solely directed to situated instances. Constructs within the model, like 'supervisor support' and 'knowledge brought into the organisation', could also be applied to formal learning situations. The situated learning transfer model sees learning at its starting point. It may be argued that the level of awareness of this process can strongly impinge on the extent of usefulness to the organization.

A qualitative study with forty respondents from two ICT organisations was carried out to assess the emergent findings against the different constructs identified in the SLT model. In an attempt to clarify the emerging factors that shape the way transfer of situated learning takes place at the workplace, the research findings are summarized below in graphic representation (Fig. 2). From right to left the model shows three concentric circles symbolizing three key areas in the research also found in the situated learning transfer model. The outermost circle contains organisation-level effect factors that emerged out of the findings. The factors' positioning does not refer to their importance in the model. As will be seen further down, 'strategies and business goals' did not emerge as significantly as initially anticipated. The middle circle represents the 'transfer climate', or rather the invisible effects that influence the implementation of learning. The inner most circle represents the individual-level effect factors that emerged, mainly referring to personality characteristics and imported know-how. To the left of the model another section represents actions where situated learning can take place. These emerging actions can present an opportunity to give situated learning at the workplace some structure that could increase awareness and potential success.

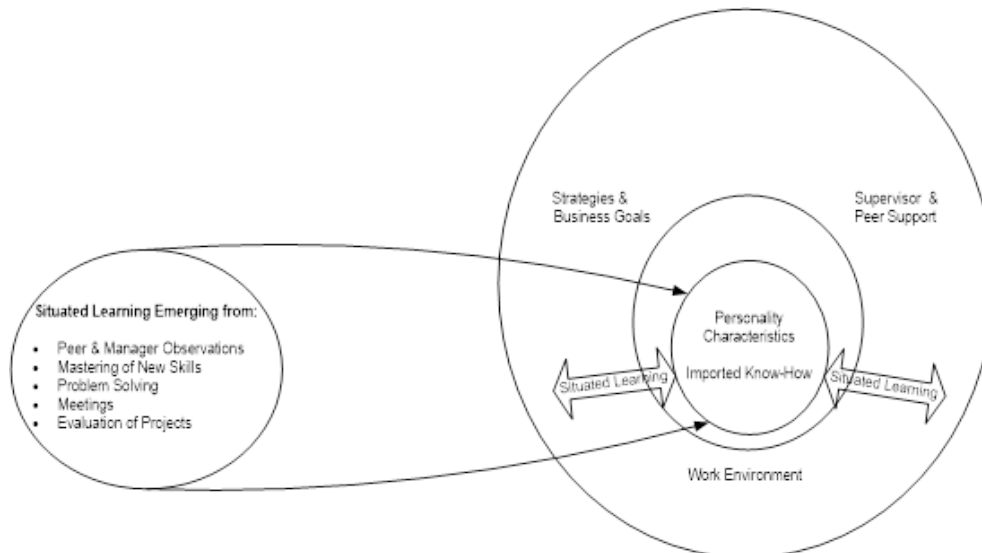
The findings are primarily divided into the following key areas, namely respondents' perception of learning which can be considered an innovative inclusion when compared to other research such as Lim and Johnson (2002). The positive perception of the value of learning appeared to support Cheng and Ho (1998), although their research focused on formal learning through training. Following the situated learning transfer model, the other sections describe the organisational level effect, other individual level effect factors besides the individuals' perception of learning in the transfer of the situated learning equation.

The illustration is based on the central conclusion that, to understand how situated learning can be transferred/implemented, we first need to clarify and delineate the various factors that condition the occurrence of that learning within workplace settings. More specifically, the illustration highlights the findings which suggest that situated learning at the workplaces studied emerges primarily from informal situations or day-to-day happenings in working environments, and that various contextual factors impact on this process. More specifically, observations, meetings, evaluation sessions, information sharing and problem solving were the key learning situations identified by respondents. It appeared that findings on the elements of sharing and

observation confirmed the social and situated aspect of learning in research by Fuller and Unwin (2003) and Lave and Wenger (1991).



Figure 1: Situated Learning Transfer Model



**Figure 2:** Graphic representation of the factors conditioning situated learning and its transfer

### 3. Typology Development

Typologies may be used as foundations in theory building (Ahlquist and Breunig, 2012), while theory is used by scholars to illustrate new contributions and describe advances in different fields (Colquitt, and Zapata-Phelan, 2007). This paper aims to build a typology of situated learning in the workplace. Nind and Lewthwaite (2019:468) state that “[A] typology is a classification of practice that distils complex data”. In their attempt to build ‘good’ typologies that bear both academic and practical significance in the area of innovation studies, O’Raghallaigh, et al. (2010) suggest four steps to follow when creating typologies. Step 1 involves the limitation of the domain of the typology. Step 2 requires scholars to identify and define concepts while step 3 relates to the explanation of relationships between the different concepts. Finally, in step 4, scholars should offer potential predictions of how elements of the typology might interact.

In the current paper, the steps by O’Raghallaigh, et al. (2010) could be loosely followed since they offer clear explanations of what should take place at each step. Firstly, the domain of the typology is identified as learning in the workplace. More specifically, this topology addresses learning through a situated form. The identification of constructs was also relatively straightforward since the typology was designed based on the findings of a study proposing the SLT model. Step 3 involves the explain of the relationships between the different concepts.

This explanation along with potential predictions that should be offered in step 4 are outlined following the definition of the different concepts in the typology offered below.

Formal learning only offers the acquisition of knowledge in a small part. Situated learning through its contextualized form encourages the constant co-creation of knowledge and offers a variety of learning opportunities. The VUCA (Hadar et al. 2020) world we are currently experiencing with its volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous challenges dictates the need to adapt to new situations in an ever-changing workplace. Implementing an approach where learning is considered to be a part of the individual’s development while acknowledging opportunities of where and when it happens can be considered critical in the current context.

The findings from the study mentioned above indicated that an effective environment for the transfer of learning is one where employees are encouraged and enabled to reflect on learning episodes that would otherwise remain invisible and ignored.

With the potential of contributing to research, policy and practice through its focus on informal, incidental learning, the typology is divided into three focal categories; organizational enhancers of transfer from situated learning, instances where situated learning takes place, and contextual elements that may influence the degree of transfer. The proposed typology, was inspired by a number of elements surrounding situated learning and learning at the workplace in general. These aspects were drawn from research findings and other workplace learning literature as observed in the literature review.

**Table 1:** A Typology of Factors Impacting Upon Situated Learning Transfer.

<b>Organizational Enhancers (activities that may facilitate transfer from situated learning)</b>	<b>Instances of Situated Learning (activities that provide opportunities for engagement with learning opportunities)</b>	<b>Contextual Elements (tacit activities and events that may influence the opportunities to transfer situated learning)</b>
Learning Strategy	Formal and Informal Meetings	Supervisor Support
Organisational Goal Setting	Feedback from clients	Peer Support
Individual Goal Setting	Internal Feedback (supervisor & Peers)	Workload
Coaching/Mentoring	Project Based Learning – organisation, process and evaluation	Opportunity to Use
Promotion of Reflective Thinking	Observation of others	Autonomy
Sharing of information	Problem Solving	Organisational attitude towards learning

### 3.1 Organisational Enhancers for Situated Transfer of Learning

Organizational enhancers that may facilitate transfer from situated learning, could be manifested through activities that could be explicitly intertwined with daily routines on the job with the aim to increase the application of new learning. The enhancers in the typology represent the activities that could be promoted within the organisation to create the need for learning and structure. They may overlap with other sections in the typology wherein the ‘curriculum’ and the contextual element take place. Coaching and mentoring could be interpreted to overlap with supervisor support. There are distinctive differences between coaching and mentoring and mere supervisor support, mainly stemming from the requirement of former methods to mentor and to give constructive feedback. The organisational enhancers for the situated transfer of learning are delineated below.

*Learning Strategy:* This term refers to learning that employees are expected to go through during their life time with the organisation. A mindful exercise that explicitly identifies processes and activities could be beneficial both for the organization and for the individual.

*Organisational Goal Setting:* Creating an awareness and sharing of the vision and goals of the organization could motivate employees to engage more by being more aware of situated learning instances and its transference.

*Individual Goal Setting:* Clear communication and understanding of processes is critical. Identifying knowledge gaps could arguably make situated learning more explicit and promote mindful activities.

*Coaching and Mentoring:* Good practices should be shared. Coaching and mentoring may help new entrants to engage with their role within the organisation.

*Promotion of Reflective Thinking:* The ability to look back and assess may provide opportunities for further improvement thus creating a learning environment.

*Sharing of information:* Initiatives like Quality Circles could initiate new dialogues that promote learning instances.

### 3.2 Instances where situated learning takes place

Instances of situated learning highlight some areas where learning opportunities could reside in a situated environment.

*Formal and Informal Meetings:* These settings could provide space for deliberate thinking about learning processes in the workplace.

*Feedback from Clients:* Feedback is an invaluable source of knowledge. It may help organisations to reassess processes to fine tune and improve effectiveness.

*Internal Feedback:* Making the space and time to discuss could make organisations more mindful of their modus operandi. Safe environments where employees can share feedback could provide excellent learning experiences.

*Project Based Learning:* Providing new experiences, new opportunities perhaps on rotation with different members of staff through projects may be a motivating source of gaining know-how.

*Observation of Others:* Modelling of good practices could instill desired behavioural patterns.

*Problem Solving:* Deliberate effort to explore organisational issues could be supported with know-how from different departments. Combinatorial efforts leading to novel solutions could result in new learning.

Each one of these instances contains essentials of communication, feedback and organisational skills. Using these essentials each instance can provide the possibility for tacit learning of new material. The final element of the typology concerns the contextual elements of situated transfer of learning.

### **3.3 Contextual Elements**

In the proposed typology, contextual elements refer to work situations embedded in the organisation that arise out of day-to-day activities at the workplace.

*Supervisor Support:* Instances in which the supervisor or manager presents scope for learning at the workplace. Support can encourage explicit reflection on what has been learnt, therefore making such learning more amenable to transfer.

*Peer Support:* Peers in the workplace can be an important learning resource, through observation, problem solving and sharing of ideas. Space to share practices could enhance support and facilitate transfer of situated learning.

*Workload:* Pressure and stress created by the workload could hinder learning opportunities. The role of this factor in the typology is considerable even if the workload could be a subjective factor to assess.

*Opportunity to Use:* Creating situations where learned skills may be applied could enhance the value of situated learning.

*Autonomy:* High levels of autonomy could prompt of situated learning. The respondents clearly felt that, when working autonomously, they needed to learn how to prioritise, make decisions and get feedback. This appears to be one of the more crucial factors in creating a climate for the transfer of learning.

*Organisational attitude towards learning:* Setting up an appropriate organisational attitude, like being positive and willing to share information may facilitate transfer from situated learning.

It is hoped that through its simplicity, this typology can provide the basis for situated learning and its transfer in the workplace. Failure to acknowledge the often tacit learning opportunities presented at the workplace could potentially damage the organisational memory of the firm and create work intensification through work related stress.

The function of the contextual elements in the typology is to highlight the situational areas that could potentially be further exploited to enhance the learning culture and application of new learning. The proposed typology covers broad areas that related to the employee experience in the workplace. The relationships between the different concepts offered may vary according to the work environment and personal characteristics of the employee, co-workers and supervisor. In a VUCA world the dynamics would constantly shift due to the need to adapt to different circumstances, however, one could predict that a linear relationship between the three core concepts, namely organizational enhancers that may facilitate transfer from situated learning, instances of situated learning and contextual elements is not realistic due to changing conditions in the work environment. Notwithstanding this, if these elements are brought to the awareness of the key players, the employee, co-workers and supervisors, then the possibilities for transfer from situated conditions are predicted to increase.

## **4. Further Research**

The typology may indicate similarity in concept to the organisational knowledge creation theory outlined by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995). This parallel between transfer/application and creation of organisational knowledge gives the study a further innovative aspect and contribution to existing literature. Nonaka and

Takeuchi (1995) are predominantly preoccupied with the process of knowledge creation through the generation of a spiral that appears to have a snowball effect though its progression. The knowledge, starting in the individual, spirals to become explicit also goes through the motions of socialisation and combination. Similarities can now be outlined in the 'use' of definitions for operational terms like 'organisational knowledge creation'.

Two other parallel can be drawn to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) referring to value creation and the provision of a new outlook on knowledge and learning in organisations. As a contribution to current literature, the typology is hoped to address a gap in the literature while also bearing practical relevance in view of the use of informal learning at the workplace.

Any conclusions and outcomes arising from the proposed typology must be considered within the context of the limitations of the research on which it was built. The most significant element is the focus on situated learning and the transfer process within the workplace. The suggested typology could inspire in depth research which could also further validate or refine the SLT model. Hager (2003) suggests that most of our understanding of learning behaviours continues to be based on assumptions stemming out of formal learning settings. It is hoped that the study will instigate further research into pedagogical issues pertaining to the area of transfer of learning at the workplace. Further qualitative research needs to take place with a focus on the situativity of workplace learning, taking into consideration learning behaviours and social elements surrounding tacit processes operating at individual and organisational levels.

Further research is needed both at organisational and individual levels. However, it would be interesting to find more research investigating the interplay between the organisation and the individual and how that plays on the transfer of learning at the workplace. A third element to this dimension could potentially include the external environment and how it affects the organisation through pressures on the supply chain and economic issues instigated by the VUCA world. More specifically, research is needed in areas that regard the contextual elements of learning and how different agents affect learning environments.

Through the elements identified in the typology, a link is noted between the overall organizational vision and goals, communication, and the readiness for learning in the organisation. It would be interesting to investigate how reflective thinking could shape the organizational vision and goals and how the interplay of these elements could influence outcomes at the level of instances of situated learning and also the contextual elements that surround these instances therefore an interplay between the three main elements of the typology. This could result in a dynamic model that may ultimately support the mapping of organizational practices that may lead to more emphasis on situated learning and its transfer to the workplace. A workplace curriculum that may instigate a growth mindset could foster organizational readiness and provide the ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

## **5. Conclusion**

Workplaces are dynamic entities that are susceptible to the changes in and around them providing ecosystems where many opportunities for situated learning occur. However, such opportunities are not always recognised by individuals. Similarly, the ways in which that situated learning can be applied are little understood and rarely explicitly used. In conclusion, situated learning at the workplace is a crucial but still often neglected phenomenon that holds important elements for organisational memory and overall performance of the firm. The unspoken issues stemming from identified factors that appeared to impinge on the transfer of situated learning have inspired the typology to enhance workplace learning transfer. Finally, it is concluded that specific learning instances need to be further enhanced through mechanisms that can help to make explicit, and to codify the tacit knowledge available, though the social context that is the workplace. Only when such situated learning is better understood, and rendered more visible can we begin to make it more transferable.

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