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Using Metaphors to Capture the Context of Informal Workplace Learning

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Introduction and Background
Informal learning in the workplace is a prevalent form of learning that scholars contend may constitute approximately 70 – 90% of the learning in organizations (Cross, 2009, Center for Workforce Development, 1998). Unlike more formalized and institutionally sponsored workplace learning interventions, this form of learning typically occurs as employees naturally respond to problems and challenges that they encounter within their work which may require a need for learning. Although informal learning may occur individually, scholars suggest that such learning is often very collaborative and can involve a variety of learning partners and is therefore inherently social constructed and contextually embedded (Marsick, Watkins, Wilson and Volpe, 2009). Therefore, in recent years, attention has been focused on better understanding the context in which informal learning occurs so that insights on how such learning can be encouraged, facilitated, supported, and nurtured, suggesting that context is a critical determinant. In fact, Watkins and Cervero (2000) acknowledge that “there is some evidence in the larger field of human resource development that a focus on the learning of individuals is less significant than a focus on the organization as a context for learning” (p. 193). The need for research that focuses on how organizations inhibit and facilitate such learning has also been articulated by other scholars (Billett, 2000; Karakowsky and McBey, 1999; Lohman, 2000; Sambrook and Stewart, 2000; Skule, 2004). Therefore, to address various calls for research on context as it influences informal workplace learning, Ellinger (2005) designed and implemented a qualitative case study to explore the contextual factors that positively and negatively shaped employees’ informal learning and their facilitation of others’ learning.

This research study was undertaken within a consumer-focused manufacturer located in the Eastern region of the United States. A two tier purposeful sampling strategy was used to identify the primary case, “Reinventing Itself Company,” and the case participants. Case participants represented nominated exemplary learners and those deemed as exemplary facilitators of others’ learning. The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) and semi-structured interviews were the primary approaches to data collection. Employees were asked to identify two informal learning incidents in which they felt they had learned something important. This collection of incidents was followed by semi-structured interview questions that focused on what employees felt constituted an optimal environment to learn. Employees were then asked to use an imaginary disposable camera to take photos of aspects of the environment that influenced their learning. They also generated metaphors to describe their learning environment. Following this sequence, the same approach was used, but to solicit critical incidents in which the employees perceived they had helped others learn. The same approaches to collecting data on the facilitation of others’ learning using semi-structured interviews, imaginary photography and metaphors were sued. A total of 30 informal learning incidents were collected and a total of 27 incidents involving the facilitation of others’ learning were collected. The CIT data and semi-structured interview data were analyzed using constant comparative analysis. The findings from this set of data have been published accordingly (Ellinger, 2005; Ellinger and Cseh, 2007b). The datasets involving the metaphors and imaginary photography were not analyzed at this time, in spite of their utility to supplement the findings and further serve as additional sources of data and findings triangulation. However, Ellinger and Cseh (2007a) became interested in examining the total of 24 metaphors that were captured that reflected the employees’ perceptions of the
environment as a place for informal learning along with their perceptions of the environment as a place for facilitating others’ learning. They began to examine literature on the subject of metaphors and subsequently described the 24 metaphors that were articulated in Ellinger and Cseh (2007) and attempted to draw some connections between the metaphors articulated and the original findings of the study. However, an in-depth analysis of the metaphors as they relate to the findings and to the other metaphors themselves has not yet been fully explicated. This more nuanced analysis of metaphors is the subject of this working paper abstract.

**Brief Overview of Metaphors**

Morgan’s (1986) “Images of Organization” popularized the notion of using metaphors to describe organizations. His conception of organizations as machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons (Plato’s Cave), flux and transformation, and instruments of domination have been widely disseminated in the management literature. Gherardi (2000) has acknowledged that metaphorical language is “one of the most important devices by which knowledge is generated” (p. 1058). Ricketts and Seiling (2003) describe the importance of the use of language, stating "words are a rich and complex set of interrelated symbols "surrounded" by emotional meanings and understandings" (p. 34). The creation of a metaphor uses the power of words to create an image that facilitates a common understanding among members of an organization. Gherardi (2000) views metaphors as "situated artifacts," stating that "they do not have meaning, but they acquire and create meaning in the discursive interactions of those who produce them" (p. 1075). Further, Ricketts and Seiling (2003) state that the use of metaphors allows organizations to "frame existing realities into new opportunities, to reflect and design different, previously not thought of viewpoints, and schemas, while removing past contradictions and assumptions" (p. 37).

In addition to management, other disciplines have used metaphors such as marketing and more specifically within the service context to explicate service encounters and service delivery (Goodwin, 1996; Zaltman, LeMasters, & Heffring, 1982). Short (2001) acknowledges that psychology, information systems, psychotherapy, and organization development have also focused on metaphors. Metaphors have been used by organizational change agents and consultants, by organizational members reflecting on their assumptions about the organization, and researchers, themselves, use metaphors to “articulate ideas” (Richardson, 1991, p. 7 in Goodwin, 1996). Gherardi (2000) examined metaphors that were produced within a planning group tasked to design an action learning intervention within a municipality. Gherardi considered the role of metaphors as both “facilitators of learning and as generators or knowledge” (p. 1058). Yet, despite the use of metaphor within the field of human resource development (HRD) to characterize and describe the field as well as organization development and change initiatives, limited attention has been given to exploring the use of metaphors within the context of informal workplace learning. In essence, the gap that we have identified in the literature is better understanding how employees use the language of metaphor to capture their perceptions of their environments as a site for their learning and facilitation of informal learning.
The Articulated Metaphors to be Analyzed

A total of 13 metaphors were articulated by learners when considering their organizational environment as a place for their informal learning. A total of 11 metaphors were articulated by learners when considering their organizational environment as a place for their facilitation of others’ learning. Table 1 presents these metaphors.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphors Articulating the Environment as a Place for Their Informal Learning</th>
<th>Metaphors Articulating the Environment as a Place for Their Facilitation of Others’ Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An open-check book; a funnel (Dale)</td>
<td>A road map (Dale)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourager (Richard)</td>
<td>Encourager (Richard)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Gambling Boat (Kat)</td>
<td>Disneyworld (Kat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A School (Bob)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dollar Bills Rushing out the Door (Doug)</td>
<td>Fast and Flexible Organization (Doug)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Cage with the Door Wide Open (Allison)</td>
<td>Family Reunion (Allison)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Arrow (Gabrielle)</td>
<td>Slogan/Catch Phrase – “Being Better” (Gabrielle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Couple of Lounge Chairs and Umbrella on the Beach (Ponie)</td>
<td>Teamwork (Ponie)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Flower (Peter)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheel: The Big Picture (Tom)</td>
<td>Mentoring Organization (Tom)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallway; Telephone (Amanda)</td>
<td>A River of Change (Amanda)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slogan/Catch-Phrase – “Can You Be Better” (Nicole)</td>
<td>The Training Room: Supportive Organization (Nicole)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Painting (Lucy)</td>
<td>A Circle of People (Lucy)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of analyzing metaphors, Andriessen and Gubbins (2009) acknowledge that “there is much debate about the way metaphor works” (p. 847), in terms of whether “metaphor is simply a matter of comparison, highlighting the analogies in the source and target domain of the metaphor, or whether a metaphor does more than that” (p. 847). They acknowledge that here are different perspectives on metaphor such as correspondence theory of metaphor, domains-interaction model, conceptual metaphor theory (Andriessen and Gubbins, 2009). These authors use systematic metaphor analysis, based on conceptual metaphor theory to analyze three seminal articles on social capital. Given these varied perspectives and potential approaches for further analyzing the metaphors captured in the original study, we are exploring the most appropriate approaches for analyzing these metaphors at this phase of our in-process working paper abstract. We anticipate being able to articulate our approach for analysis and sharing our findings accordingly.

Limitations and Implications for Research and Practice

While metaphors can be powerful tools that enable research participants to express their assumptions and meanings regarding a particular topic or concept, they can also be considerably limiting. Metaphors may limit participants’ focus and as Morgan (1986) has acknowledged, “Metaphor is inherently paradoxical. It can create powerful insights that also become distortions, as the way of seeing created through a metaphor becomes a way of not seeing” (p. 5). Despite these potential limitations, the use of metaphors could be pragmatically useful to the research participants and organizations in which data is collected because they offer a window into employees’ assumptions about the environment in which they work and learn and can be
useful gauges of how change initiatives are perceived and how they are unfolding as well as how the culture may be changing and how new roles may be adopted. From a research perspective, using metaphors as an alternative and complementary form of data collection for analysis and triangulation purposes may enable researchers to broaden their understanding about abstract concepts and topics and enhance internal validity and trustworthiness of qualitative data.

References


**Supplemental and Informative Sources**


