

The culture of employee learning in South Africa: towards a conceptual framework

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Abstract

The shortage of skills amongst employees in both the private and public sectors in South Africa continues to be a topical issue as exemplified by the continued existence of a list of scarce skills which is published by the Department of Higher Education (DHET). However, the notion that there is a shortage of skills in the country has begun to be challenged with some scholars arguing that the real problem is a jobs shortage attributable to structural inequalities which are a legacy of apartheid and failure by the government post-1994 to address these inequalities. This, we argue, is the reason why unemployment, unemployability and wide workplace inequalities, especially as they affect people from previously disadvantaged groups (mainly women and black employees), persist. We further contend that what is missing from the debates around skills shortage in South Africa and the wider phenomenon to which these debates belong, that is, employee learning, is a holistic conceptualisation of the culture associated with it on the part of the government, employers, workers' unions and even academia. Conceptualisation of this culture needs to go beyond the government and employer initiatives to the actual process by which employee learning takes place. In other words, it also needs to take into account the employees' biographies, identities and subjectivities as well as the social interactions which they engage in as they learn in the workplace. We therefore propose a two-tier framework which integrates implications from two theories, that is Human Capital Theory (HCT) and Critical Realism (CR). Implied in HCT is the suggestion that the culture of employee learning is a function of the employer-initiated learning programmes, such as short courses offered by private employee learning service providers, Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) and block-release programmes run by some institutions of higher learning. The basic aim of these forms of learning would be to increase profitability through improved productivity which itself is a result of employees having been equipped with the requisite skills. Using CR, and Bourdieu's (1986) idea of habitus, we, however, argue that the final architecture of the culture of employee learning is not linear but a complex and multi-layered product of such factors as the employees' family and educational backgrounds as well as individual and collective agency in addition to the government and employers' initiatives such as the afore-mentioned short courses. We also draw on Bernstein's (1996) notion of learning domains to suggest that attention be paid to employees' lived experiences which also mediate their responses to the government and employee learning initiatives.

This would help with aligning government and organisational employee learning initiatives and strategies to the employees' individual and collective workplace learning aspirations.

Introduction

The shortage of skills amongst employees in both the private and public sectors in South Africa continues to be a topical issue as highlighted in government documents such as the successive National Skills Development Strategies and the continued existence of a list of the so-called scarce skills which is published by the Department of Higher Education (DHET). However, the notion that there is a shortage of skills in the country has begun to be challenged. Some scholars argue that the real problem is a jobs shortage which is a result of both apartheid-related structural inequalities and failure by the post-1994 government to effectively address these inequalities. This is despite the passing of various pieces of legislation, the establishment of a number of institutions and the formulation of strategies aimed at doing so (Ngcwangu and Balwanz, 2014). Examples of these respectively include the Skills Development Act Number 97 of 1998; the SETAs and National Development Strategies 1–3. Yet problems such as unemployment and unemployability and widespread workplace inequalities especially as they relate to people from previously disadvantaged groups persist. As a result, some scholars assert that the skills revolution in the country has failed (Freeman, 2015).

As an addition to this argument we contend that what is missing from the debates around skills shortage in South Africa and the wider phenomenon to which these debates belong, that is, employee learning, is a holistic conceptualisation of the culture associated with such learning on the part of the government, employers, private employee learning service providers, trade unions and even academia. This culture and its conceptualisation are dynamic and complex phenomena which both academics and human resource development practitioners are continuously grappling with (Govender, 2009). In addition, while a lot has been written about organisational learning as exemplified by Senge's (1996) notion of systems thinking, and the ways in which individuals and small teams learn (McGourty and De Meuse, 2001), very little is known about how to systematically create strong, mutually beneficial and sustainable learning cultures in organisations (Coutu, 2002).

A major factor to which the problems discussed above are attributable is the tendency to conflate organisational learning and individual or team learning, on the one hand, with effective individual learning on the other (Antonacopoulou, 2006). It therefore needs to be acknowledged that organisations may have all the requisite systems, structures and strategies for their employees to learn, but these may not be matched by the actual learning which their employees realise. This may be due to the absence of the culture or glue that holds together the systems, structures and strategies, on the one hand, to individual employees' learning aspirations and the practices which they engage in to acquire new knowledge, competencies and attitudes, on the other (Antonacopoulou, 1999).

The limited focus on skills shortage in the debates about employee learning in South Africa has created a skewed focus on the supply-side (Ncgwangu, 2014; Vally and Motala, 2014). Consequently, a lot of attention has been paid by both government and employers to the official framework of employee learning. Constituting this framework are government and employer's initiatives. These are the normative strategies and policies which continue to be privileged over the employees' own biographies, identities and subjectivities which critically influence the actual process by which workplace learning takes place. As a contribution to attempts to address the current employee learning challenges in South Africa such as the failure by government's legislative and strategic initiatives to solve the workplace inequalities between different racial groups, we argue for a holistic conceptual framework which interrogates the culture of such learning beyond the government and employer's initiatives. To this end, we advocate the incorporation of insights from two contesting theories, Human Capital Theory (HCT) (Almenndarez, 2011; Olaniyan and Okemakinde, 2008) and Critical Realism (Bhaskar, 1978; Archer, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2006). We also borrow from the notion of domains of learning (Bernstein, 1996, 2000) and the idea of habitus (Bourdieu, 1986).

The culture of employee learning: crystalising the concept

The concept of culture refers to the norms, values and practices that influence how people live their lives (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Like social entities, organisations also have cultures and sub-cultures which have a bearing on the form of relationships, policies and practices in them (Sponaule, 2014). Rebelo and Gomes (2011, p.173), say the culture of employee learning is a

sub-culture of organisational learning which is, "...oriented towards the promotion and facilitation of workers' learning, its share and dissemination, in order to contribute to organizational development and performance." This sub-culture manifests itself in the learning activities that both groups and individuals in an organisation participate in (Vergas, 2008; Senge, 2006). Since learning takes places in more than one way, we argue that constituting this sub-culture are elements other than just technicist training or skills acquisition. These include the nurturing of positive attitudes towards learning, awareness of diversity and responsible citizenship of the world.

From the foregoing, we conclude that the culture of employee learning is both a determinant of, and is determined by, employees' perceptions of work-related learning. It also influences how they respond to the work-based learning initiatives and, ultimately, an organisation's capacity to achieve its goals. An organisation in which there is a strong culture of employee learning is therefore one where learning is promoted, incentivised and valued by all role players including management and unions. Rebelo and Gomes (2011, p.27) add that this is done through, amongst, other ways, "... a social process of sharing..." which places emphasis on people; accommodates the interests of all stakeholders and encourages collaborative sharing of knowledge, for example through the formation of communities of learning in workplaces.

Employee learning in South Africa: context and challenges

Since 1994 the South African government has taken a number of steps to redress the skills shortage problem. An example is the passing of legislation and formulation of strategies which are specifically aimed at creating the framework for skills development. These include Skills Development Act Number 97 of 1998; the Skills Development Levies Act Number 9 of 1999; the series of National Skills Development Strategies; Adult Basic Education(ABET) programmes and the establishment of structures such as the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETA's) and creation of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in 2009 (Tshilongamulenzhe and Coetzee, 2013).

As alluded to earlier, whereas a lot of effort has been expended towards a framework for employee learning at both government and individual

organisation levels, there are still huge challenges in terms of actual practice in both spheres and in terms of employees as a collective and individuals (Freeman, 2015). In our view, this is because, to date, many of the interventions have tended to narrowly focus on short term skills training at the expense of cultivation of a culture which enables employees to both individually and collectively embrace learning as an ever-existing imperative. This has seriously constrained cultivation of a strong culture of employee learning at national, organisational and individual levels thus contributing to the persistence of challenges such as unemployment and unemployability. As highlighted earlier, manifest themselves in the existence of a list of skills which South African employers struggle to find potential employees in possession of as well as high unemployment levels, especially amongst the youth some of whom have tertiary education qualifications.

Blamed in part for the challenges discussed above is The Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) system, which is supposed to be one of the key drivers of employee learning. Some commentators on human resource development have actually labelled it a waste of resources. For example, Nkosi (2015, p.11) says this is because implementation of its mandate has "...fallen woefully short." The constant policy and strategy changes in the sector have also not helped matters. Tembe and Sehume (2016, p.18) thus accuse the government of making, "...schizophrenic policy choices..." Ultimately, this has a negative bearing on employee learning and the culture associated with it.

Freeman (2015, p.2) also faults the SETAs for having become very bureaucratic as they are, "... mired in systems, processes, compliance mechanisms and tick-boxes". Freeman argues that by narrowly focusing on such aspects of skills development as unit standards, the country is now saddled with, "...people who are competent in unit standards but not workplace performance". There is therefore doubt over the efficacy of legislative solutions to the problems in employee learning whose genesis lies in apartheid and its legacy. This is because these solutions are mainly characterised by performativity regimes, reflecting superficial conformity with government legislation on the part of organisations without paying much attention to the realities of the disadvantaged backgrounds from which a large number of South African workers come from in terms of both basic and post-school education.

The problems discussed above are aggravated by weaknesses in terms of the participation of key stakeholders such as the unions. Yet according to Radebe (2017, p.1), for employee learning initiatives to bear fruit, “Stakeholders should have an important voice at the table of policy level and be involved in decision-making at the institutional level.” A major constraining factor seems to be that, generally, the unions’ major pre-occupation is still the immediate bread and butter issues such as parity of employees’ remuneration across different races in spite of their commitment, on paper, to employee learning. Secondly, a large number of workers still come to the workplace without the requisite competencies to demand a full stake in their own learning (Kraak, Jewinson, Pillay, Chidi, Bhagwan, Nomvete and Engelbrecht, 2013) This makes workplace learning initiatives the preserve of the government and employers. Yet it is these initiatives which the culture of employee learning reflects, for example, in terms of values and attitudes. The national outcry about skills shortages thus persists, hence the need for a reconceptualisation of both the practice and culture of employee learning in South Africa.

Employee learning: the conceptualisation debate

Two theories on the basis of which employee learning and its culture can be conceptualised are Human Capital Theory (HCT) and Critical Realism (CR). The primary concern in (HCT) is skilling employees for efficiency in productivity, thus leading to greater profitability (Foray and Lundvall, 1996; Fitzsimons, 1999). Proponents of HCT therefore believe that both individuals and societies learn in order to prosper (Senge, 1996).

HCT implications for employee learning

HCT has several implications for employee learning and the culture associated with it (Olaniyan and Okemakinde, 2008). One of these, for example, is that where the intention by the state or any organisation is to improve the performance and efficiency of workers, it has to be accompanied by a concomitant investment in their learning activities. This implies positive intentionality on the part of the state and the individual organisations to ensure employee learning. Since in our view, employee learning is broader than just technicist training and short courses offered by the employer, this potentially creates conflict and tensions in a situation where employees want

to independently pursue their own learning. On the positive side, though, this implies that the higher the investment in a learning programme, the higher should be the earnings of the individuals engaged in the programme upon successful completion (Olaniyan and Okemakinde, 2008). This could be a source of motivation for employees, thus strengthening the culture of employee learning.

The influence of HCT on employee learning in South Africa manifests itself at conceptualisation level (Vally and Motala, 2014; Ngcwangu, 2014). An example is the proposal that in order for the country to unlock its economy, it needs to improve its educational outcomes starting from primary school as this would produce learners who can more easily engage in post-school learning such as that which happens in the workplace (Peacock, 2013). Similarly, Molelemane (2015, p.16) says investment in education and skills development and, by extension, the creation of a strong national culture of work-related learning is seen as the *sin qua non* for both the economic and social problems in the country (Nkwanyana, 2015). This argument is illustrated with reference to the relative success achieved by some resource-poor European nations that have invested in quality education and have nurtured strong cultures of learning in their citizens. Another specific example given is that of Japan which also has fewer natural resources than South Africa, and emerged from the Second World War with most of its industry destroyed. Yet it is one of the most powerful economies in the world today because of investing in quality education which, amongst other strengths, prepares people for continuous learning beyond the basic education level (Molemane, 2015). This is perhaps why, speaking at the 2017 World Economic Forum, (Radebe, 2017) highlighted the need for countries to invest in education which guarantees effective skills development which in turn would enable them to compete in a "...knowledge-based global market where the key differentiators are skills, expertise, know-how and the ability to deliver excellent services speedily, with agility and efficiently".

The HCT phantasmagoria: the illusion of jobs, higher earnings and prosperity

HCT has been criticised, for example, because of evidence refuting a strong link between education and economic prosperity for individuals and society (Ashton and Lauder, 2003). For example, evidence from many parts of the

world shows that this purported link is actually illusory (Vally and Motala, 2014). In addition, Cope and Watts (2000) also argue that simply putting in place employee learning structures and systems and declaring positive intentions is not enough as it tends to be centralist-driven, sets rigid milestones (Cope and Watts, 2000). Ultimately, it leads to deterministic outcomes (Fejes and Nicoll, 2008).

Criticism of HCT has led to attempts to reconceptualise it to broaden its applicability to human resources development (Vally and Motala, 2014). This has been done, for example, through the notion of learning organisations (Senge, 2006). However, doubts still persist over some of the theory's claims. For example, Skyrme and Amidion (2002, p. 265) argue that it is incorrect to conflate organisational learning with individual learning because of the risk of categorizing some organisations, "... by default to be 'not learning', which is patently not true". Similarly, Harrison (2010, p.131) cautions that,

Organisations comprise many, and often, conflicting, human needs and interests, and are themselves influenced by wider contexts. Diverse interests and influences do not always conveniently converge in common pursuit of mutual learning that will benefit the organization. Sometimes their reconciliation is impossible.

As explained earlier, overall, these arguments imply that it is not always an easy task to establish a perfect point of convergence between organisational and individual learning as HCT would have us believe. Multi-faceted and multi-layered tensions between the two are not uncommon thus making it difficult to conclude that in all cases, organisational learning will translate into individual learning. Consequently, Poell (2005, p.108) concludes that, "...if there is such a thing as a learning organization, it represents a process rather than a fixed state".

HCT and its related concepts such as learning organisations are also said to be a limited notion as organisations are products of visions, ideas, norms and beliefs. The sum total of their architecture is therefore more malleable than that of their material structure. As learning agents of their organisations, human beings behave in ways that cannot be easily systematised.

Organisational cultures (the defining norms, values and practices of an organisation), employee backgrounds and social environments, therefore, become more critical as determinants of how employee learning takes place than the official systems put in place with the hope of satisfying strategic imperatives (Armstrong, 2007).

In respect of South Africa, the influence of structural factors that act as barriers to employment and employability also brings some of the claims in HCT into question (Baatjies, 2014). For example, based on the results of research at four public universities, Walker (2015, p.1) concludes that it is futile to talk about employability in South Africa without taking into consideration how “...socially inclusive the labour market is”. These results show that there is a correlation between race and unemployment amongst university graduates because of friendship and family networks with potential private or public employers. Sikhakhane (2016, p.11) confirms these findings when, he draws parallels between South Africa and countries such as Chile and Columbia in terms of the paradox of the low returns from higher education when he points out that, “Many of the young people who have swelled South Africa’s higher education system are headed for the boulevard of broken dreams.” This shows that there are limitations to conceptualising both school and post-school learning in terms of it serving the utilitarian purpose of guaranteeing employment and efficiency in job performance. In addition, according to Moya (2016, p.10), the South African Statistician–General revealed that in relation to employability, “...for Indians and whites, the future is very clear. For coloureds and black youth, it’s not. It takes twice the effort for a black child qualified from the same university”. This represents a structural reality which may result in some black graduates taking up jobs which they did not specialise in at tertiary education level. An implication for the culture of employee learning from this is that such employees might need to acquire new knowledge and competencies. This raises the question as to their preparedness and ability to do so.

Critical realism: we learn because we are

CR advocates a holistic analysis of the historical and social contexts in which social events such as employee learning take place (Bhaskar, 1978). In this regard, a cross-link is said to exist amongst three components which can be used to explain any social phenomenon. The three components are structure, culture and agency (Archer, 1996).

Structure refers to those institutions which are mandated with the power to give direction to social activities (Westhood and Clegg, 2003). Such institutions do not necessarily have to be physical (Archer, 2006). Structures therefore manifest themselves in the systems of interaction that occur between

members of different social groups (Dobson, 2002; Spasser, 2002). This influences both public and private behavioural patterns which themselves, "... create obligations for continuity and even reproduction", (Jarvis, 1996, p.123) Structures which have the capacity to exercise power over others thus try to generate authenticity to their expectations of those with less power (Mingers, 2004; Witgren, 2004).

The culture of employee learning is inherently layered (Conner and Clawson, 2004). In the South African context, layers of employee learning are connected to structures such as the government, the (DHET), SETAs, public and private organisations, and their management, and workers' unions. This means that, for example, the form of this culture is a reflection of the expectations of each of these structures. While at the level of the government and DHET levels, the culture might reflect the expectation that organisations will conform with national legislation and policies governing employee learning, at the level of management in individual organisations it might reflect the strategic direction in which the management intends to move the organisation. Yet at the individual employee level it might be characterised by the employee's beliefs, behaviour and expression of career aspirations which themselves are a function of his or her background apart from the government and employer-initiated learning activities.

In light of the above, CR calls for an analysis of the power relations amongst the different structures and the resultant culture mainly because of their hierarchical nature (Archer, 2000). Power relations manifest themselves differently across these different layers. This is in keeping with the Foucauldian view that, "People know what they do, they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does" (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 2013, p.187). The form of the culture of employee learning is therefore also a function of the complex power dynamics across different structures and how they mediate the different factors with a bearing on employee learning. As alluded to above, individual organisations, for example, may not always implement employee learning as prescribed by government or SETAs to the letter because of profitability and survival imperatives. Yet, however small a way in which they deviate from government or SETA prescriptions directly influences the form of the culture of employee learning in the organisations. Similarly, any way in which individual employees engage in work-related learning activities outside the

government of employer's initiatives, also still contributes to the shape of the culture of employee learning in their organisations.

The relationship between structures and the social reality whose form they contribute to is a mutually influential one (Bhaskar, 1998). In other words, there is a reflexive relationship between culture and actors within society which enables man to both be made by, and make, culture (Layder, 1993; Archer, 2006). With respect to employee learning in South Africa, the unionisation of labour, for example, given the country's history, makes negotiation of endeavours to create a culture of employee learning an imperative. Ultimately, therefore, the culture should be characterised by a particular set of values, rules and standards reflecting degrees of consensus amongst the different stakeholders (Chia, 2000). The gap between the desired levels of consensus and the current contestation in prioritisation of employee learning by different role players is, as discussed earlier, a result of continued differences in foci, for example, between employers and unions despite agreement, at least in principle, on the need for an employee learning trajectory intended, amongst other things, to bring about equity in the workplace.

Critical realists acknowledge that unobservable events can be the cause of the observable (Fleetwood, 2005). Sometimes this is because the constituent components of structure do not always work harmoniously to shape the culture or sub-cultures in societies and organisations (Archer, 1996; Wigren, 2004). As alluded to earlier, the individual employee, for example, brings his or her own social and intellectual capital to the workplace learning situation (Chia and King, 2011). This may not be directly aligned to the organisation's employee learning agenda. The individual out of his or her own choice or through the influence of entities such as unions, work teams and study groups may thus pursue work-related learning goals tangential to those of the organisation (O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014). The form of the culture of employee learning is therefore also, in part, influenced by the inter-play of the harmony or tension across the different structures within an organisation.

Culture is inherently not static but morphogenetic, implying that what may characterise the culture of employee learning in an organisation today may be different tomorrow (Archer, 2006; Bhaskar, 1998). This is because of culture's responsiveness to influences both internal and external to the organisation thus making cultures and sub-cultures unstable, emergent

systems (Layder, 1994; Archer, 2004). For example, a change in the physical infrastructure related to learning in an organisation can lead to a change in the employees' attitudes to employee learning.

The role of agency in shaping the culture of employee learning

Social structures do not exist independently of the role players' conceptions of what they are doing when engaged in a particular activity. These role players are referred to as agents (Bhaskar, 1978). Wright (1999, p.10) suggests that, 'Agency is embedded within, and dependent upon, structural contexts.' In this view, agents are inextricably linked in behavior to the structures which they belong to. According to Archer (2000), agency refers to the mandate (and the ability to exercise it), which different social entities have to influence the activities and, therefore, the culture of a particular society. In terms of organisations, Jarvis (2000, p 252.) says agency is, "The vehicle by means of which institutions provide procedures through which human conduct is patterned". To achieve this, agents institute specific, rules, regulations and policies (Jarvis, 1996). This can be through rewarding or imposing certain sanctions on specific role players for conformity and violation of expected norms respectively (Fleetwood, 2005).

While most structures derive their agency from formal systems such as legislation and policies, others derive it from informal systems (Archer, 2000). With respect to employee learning, while the agency of formal structures such as management and unions is easily identifiable, that of structures like informal study, friendship and even prayer groups should not be discounted. It therefore needs to be appreciated that the culture of employee learning is also a function of how the employees mediate the often-conflicting interests of formally recognised agents and the informal ones (Drinkurth, Reigler and Wolff, 2003).

Agency can manifest itself at either the collective or individual level (Mutch, 2004). At the collective level, this can be a consequence of involuntary positioning, as a result of demographic factors such as age and gender, or corporate, where those with a perceived common interest act or are made to act collectively. As shown in Figure 1, such agency expresses itself, for example, through collaboration; cooperation; association; the formation of

social networks and the exchange of information all of which, generally, facilitates learning. At the individual level, agency can be a result of identities, subjectivities and other factors such as perceptions, attitude, motivation and aspirations (Merriam, 2001). All these have a bearing on the employees' behaviours and responses to the employers' learning project. Cumulatively this contributes to the architecture of the culture of employee learning. As a result of individual agency, there is a degree to which employee learning is so self-directed that we may not be able to decipher the role of collective agency in it. Agents are therefore cautioned against pursuing organisational goals and seeking to maintain the organisational status quo through employee learning at the expense of the aspirations or capabilities of the individual employees (Jarvis, 1996).

Overall, CR enables us to appreciate that the culture of employee learning is not just a linear function of the relationship between the employer-initiated learning activities and the employee's responses to them. Rather, it needs to be looked at as a layered, multi-dimensional and, therefore, complex function of a multiplicity of factors such as the employees' collective and individual agency in addition to government and employer's initiatives. While some facets of each of these factors may manifest themselves easily, others may not. Yet the influence of the later in trying to establish the character of the culture of employee learning should not be ignored

Towards a two-tier conceptual framework: we learn to prosper and because we are

Bernstein (2000) suggests that learning takes place within the official re-contextualising field and the pedagogic field. Drawing on this insight, we consider three important domains in which learning occurs, namely the official, social and pedagogic (see Figure 1). Found in the official domain would be two categories of structures, namely, the visible and invisible. This is based on the notion that not all structures are physical and/or visible. There are, for example, structures such as traffic rules that remain invisible but operate as structures in conditioning human behaviour. While the visible structures are identifiable with respect to any organisation, the invisible ones lie below the surface. Examples of the visible structures which influence employee learning are the DHET, SETAs, company boards, senior management all of which are responsible for the formulation of employee

learning policies and strategies. To these can be added training committees and the unions. These structures can be said to be visible because their existence is generally legislated for. One therefore does not struggle to identify them. Similarly, the culture of employee learning as represented in these structures is also easily identifiable. For example, amongst other characteristics, reflected in them would be senior management's conceptualisation of employee learning and their strategic intentions. These intentions are operationalised through the DHET and senior managers' agency and are captured in the normative employee learning initiatives.

Workers' unions as mediating structures represent the various interests of the workers including those related to employee learning. Given that they have a statutory role to play in employee learning, conceptually we see them as exercising their agency through the mandate given to them by both the government and their members to champion employee empowerment through learning and development. This would be achieved through their participation in the programmes of Training Committees. Attributable to this is the growing realisation that for effective employee learning to take place, cooperation amongst different actors is necessary (Gustavsen, 1992, Radebe, 2017). In other words, though inherently the relationships between unions and management are not characterised by consensus on many issues, we propose a situation in which this relationship is characterised by rapprochement and collaboration in order to cultivate a learning culture which is mutually and sustainably beneficial to organisations and their employees.

At the national level, the culture of employee learning can be conditioned through, for example, legislation aimed at mediating the tension between the social justice agenda and the country's competitiveness concerns. In different organisations, this culture is therefore mediated through conformity with national legislation and performativity. Beyond the national layer, are global structures such as the International Labour Organisation whose statutes may have an influence on employee learning locally, depending on compliance with international standards or alignment with global examples of good practice. The final form of the culture of employee learning thus becomes a function of the balance achieved in the inter-play of each of these often-competing pressures in addition to the employees' collective and individual work-related learning aspirations.

Constituting the invisible structures would be aspects such as organisational vision and mission statements; policies; programmes and regulations governing employee learning. What makes these structures invisible is that

they are not immediately recognisable as illustrated by the fact that, for example, as opposed to the existence and general mandate of the DHET which is common knowledge, one needs to carry out a search for the vision and mission statement of a particular organisation. Yet, like traffic rules which condition human behaviour without being visible, the influence of these structures still has a bearing on the form which the culture of employee learning assumes. Thus reflected in them, as in the visible structures, would be individual organisations' conceptualisation of the place of employee learning in their strategic intentions as well as the expected roles, responsibilities and behaviours of each of the different stakeholders involved in such learning.

On the basis of the foregoing, the final architecture of the culture of employee learning is either overt or covert. The overt components such as the workplace skills plans (WSPs); Annual Training Plans (ATRs); training rooms and training equipment are either tangible or easily observable. The covert ones, such as the hierarchical tensions across different structures and positive intentionality on the part of senior management are intangible and one would have to dig below the surface to identify them. To these, Conner and Clawson (2004) add values, assumptions, beliefs, expectations and how they are communicated in the organisation. A critical dimension of the culture of employee learning arising from the interplay of its covert and overt elements would thus be the extent to which it is seen as empowering to the employees as well as the degree to which there is affirmation of the efficacy of its outcomes and therefore their relevance. We therefore concur with Rebelo and Gomes (2011) who assert that ultimately, the form of the culture of employee learning should be such that throughout their working lives and beyond, ordinary employees' are inspired to learn how to prosper in an increasingly changing world with organisations also reaping the benefits.

The social and pedagogic domains represent the employees' lived experiences with respect to employee learning. Constituting the social dimension, would be the employees' biographies; schooling and tertiary education backgrounds and membership of social entities such as churches and political organisations. It is from these entities that the employees derive the habitus which they bring to the employee learning landscape. This is in keeping with the Bourdian view that habitus is, "...the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in deterministic ways which guide them." (Wacquant 2005, p.316). It therefore needs to be acknowledged that employees in South Africa, bring different forms of social capital which they

use to navigate employee learning initiatives thereby also contributing to the form of the culture of employee learning at both national and organisational levels.

Influencing the culture of employee learning in the social domain as well are the employees' everyday social relationships with their colleagues, resulting in, for example, the creation of workplace communities of learning. As illustrated in Figure 1, in this domain, the employees' agency is expressed through interactions, social networks, information sharing, collaboration and accommodation to attain work-relevant knowledge. Kaufman, DeYoung, Gray, Jimenez, Brown and MacKintosh (2010, p. 233) concur with this view when they assert that, "Successful learning happens with, and through, other people and what we learn depends on who we are and what we want to become, what we care about and which communities we wish to join". The importance of social interactions in the workplace lies in that they present learning opportunities through successful solutions to everyday work situations. This largely based on informal and often improvised ways of solving problems and dealing with challenging circumstances (Marsick and Watkins, 2003). What happens in the social domain therefore plays a critical role in shaping the process by which employee' acquire workplace knowledge and competencies.

Influencing the culture of employee learning in the pedagogic domain would be such aspects as the methods used in an organisation to impart knowledge and competencies to employees. These range from forms of employee learning such as classroom-based training, learning through mentorship to such instructional techniques as the lecture and demonstration. They also entail the different methods by which learning is assessed and those providing it are evaluated. All of them contribute to the culture of employee learning in an organisation.

Despite the distinction that we make amongst the different domains, we conceptualise the mediation of the culture of employee learning between the official domain, on one hand, and the social and pedagogic domains on the other we see employee learning as being made possible by the reflexive relationships amongst the different entities in these domains. For example, while senior management-one of the entities in the official domain may feel duty-bound to steer employee learning in a particular direction as captured in the organisation's vision and mission statements, for this to succeed they need the buy-in of entities such as the employees who have to express their agency as individuals or a collective.

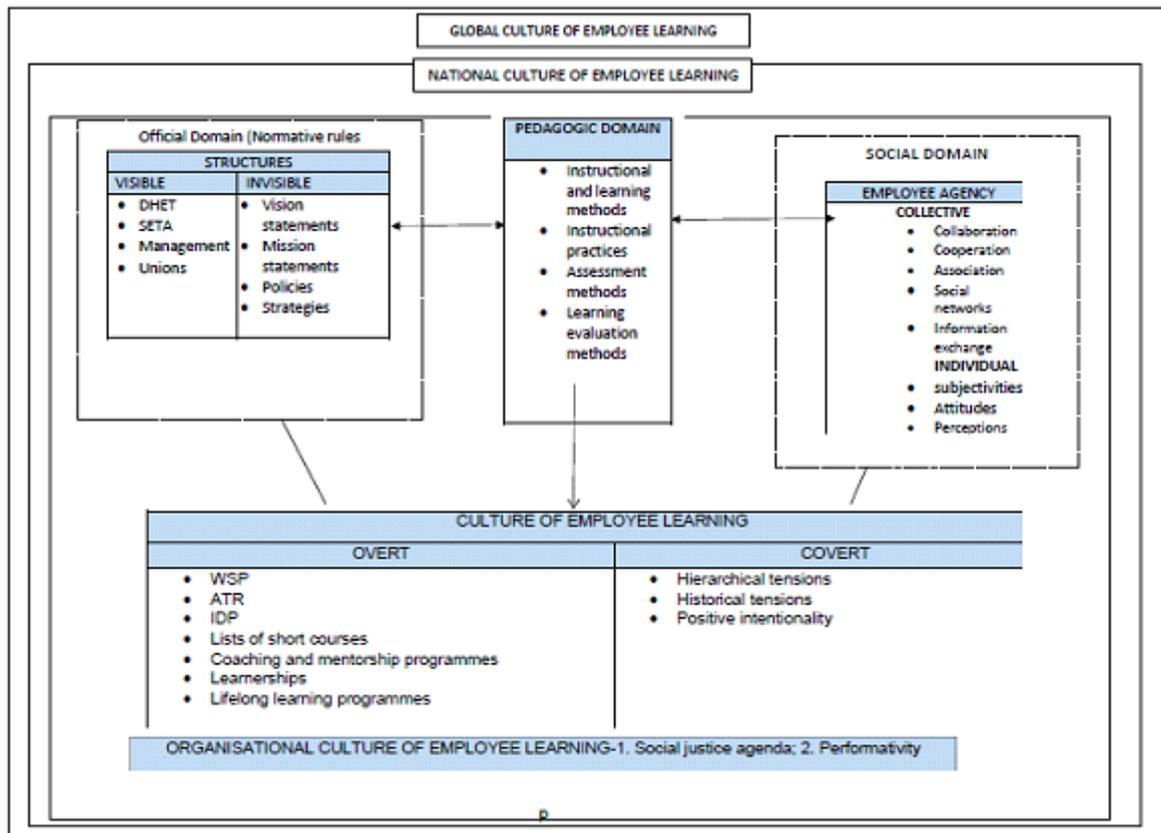


Figure 1: A proposed conceptual framework for the culture of employee learning in South Africa

Conclusion

The proposed conceptual framework for the culture of employee learning in South Africa takes cognisance of the concerns of both HCT and CR. For example, in light of both global, national and sectoral competitive imperatives, the need to equip employees with the requisite skills as advocated by HCT is inescapable. The practice of employee learning in South Africa should therefore both conform with legislative requirements and reflect senior management’s strategic intentions. However, borrowing from CR, the proposed framework suggests a holistic approach which takes into account all the factors with a bearing on the culture of employee learning. These revolve around the interplay of culture, structure and agency which gives rise to a complex, layered and multi-dimensional architecture of the culture of employee learning. Inherent in this is the influence of employees’ social biographies and educational backgrounds as well as their individual and

collective agency. Borrowing from the notion of domains of learning (Bernstein, 1996, 2000), the proposed framework also suggests that attention be paid to not only to what happens in the official domain but in the social and pedagogic domains as well. What obtains in the last two domains is particularly critical as it represents the employees' identities, subjectivities and everyday lived experiences which have an often-ignored but vitally important influence on the culture of employee learning, especially in light of the South African socio-economic transformation project. This means that, in the bid to turn South Africa into a skilled nation, the concerns of unions and employees some of which may not be easy for them to express, should be taken into account by the government and employers to secure ownership and buy-in, and create a sense of aligned ambition – the predisposition and ability to identify problems and challenges and devise agreed upon pathways to address them.

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