

RWL 2009

Symposium abstracts

Reports on research, under the auspices of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), on learning and assessment in the workplace. It aims to understand how the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) might help improve the quality of vocational education and training

(Re)constructing pedagogical identity in organisational change

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The NQF in South Africa has come under increasing attack in recent years, perhaps especially in vocational educational and training, for undermining the quality of skills acquisition in relation to the workplace. This paper outlines a theoretical framework within which we believe we should seek to recover the emancipatory, human developmental intentions of the NQF and overcome the narrow, technicist and overly bureaucratic programme that it has become in its implementation in our country. The paper engages behaviourist and constructivist formulations of an NQF as they have manifested themselves over the past decade or so in South Africa. It considers the question of what kinds of evidence lead to quality assessment judgments in vocational education and training, and suggests that the implementation of outcomes-based education in South Africa has increasingly been characterized by a conception of 'unit standard' statements as narrow descriptors of the terminal behaviours to be exhibited empirically at the end of specified learning processes – a behaviourist preoccupation. This amounts to a drive away from an understanding of outcome statements as rigorous descriptions of the criteria, structure and depth of knowledge and skill required in the workplace – a constructivist orientation in assessment – and has consequently undermined the basis for quality assessment judgments in education and training practices. However, it is suggested that a concern for the development of deep knowledge and skills in learners, and hence of the necessary conditions for quality assessment practices, has always been evident in NQF debates and processes in South Africa, and needs to be revived. The paper concludes by suggesting that the theory of communities of practice provides a more fruitful source of ideas for the future development of the NQF than do behaviourist conceptions of assessment criteria and practices.

Researching change oriented workplace learning and sustainability practices

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One of the characterising features of lifelong learning today is change. In recent years, new drivers of change have emerged in workplaces influenced by global factors such as climate change, energy shortages and wide spread degradation of ecosystem services. These issues have led to the emergence of a range of sustainable development practices in workplaces that are change oriented, in the sense that they require new forms of practice (e.g. energy efficiency practices; sustainable agricultural practices etc.). Sustainable development practices affect a wide range of sectors of the South African National Qualifications Framework and are therefore an interesting focus for understanding Work and Learning. This research programme, situated within the wider framework of the South African Qualification Authority's (SAQA) 'new era', seeks to develop in-depth understandings of change oriented workplace learning processes. In change oriented learning processes introduced by sustainability practices, tensions between the older established order of things, and new challenges of change arise. This paper examines how one might go about researching such questions. The paper focusses primarily on one of the PhD studies being undertaken in the research programme (Mukute, 2008), namely how contradictions and tensions in sustainable agricultural practices can be mobilised as expansive learning opportunities. As such, the study demonstrates how the design of the research programme is being articulated at research project level.

Towards the development of a research methodology aimed at describing the basis of assessment expertise in communities of practice in vocational contexts.

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Organizations rely mostly on work manuals to get their staff started and continuing in their daily production jobs. These manuals act as practical directives from employers and day to day guide for employees to get on with their work. Recent ethnographic workplace studies have indicated that, though employees are provided with these manuals to conduct daily business, most of the time employees are faced with difficulties in their jobs which are not manually prescribed. In dealing with those difficulties they become innovative and come up with solutions to their problems they face. These innovations in organizations are at most times unrecognized by employers as they occur at floor level when individuals interact and participate in their daily routines/jobs. This paper provides a summary of recent ethnographic research in four workplaces – a furniture factory, a hairdressing academy, a call centre, and qualifications evaluation office – aimed at understanding better how expertise develops tacitly, and how it is authorised through informal assessment processes, in the work process itself. Using ethnographic research methods, this project aims to grasp how workplace expertise accumulates over time and how it gets passed on to novices. It draws strongly on the notion of communities of practice as developed by Wenger (1998) and the idea that learning occurs through interaction in social contexts.