

The Influence of Collective Agency on the Culture of Employee Learning: the Case of Administrative Assistants at a Comprehensive South African University

George Mavunga

Abstract

This study investigated the influence of collective agency on the culture of employee learning among administrative assistants at a comprehensive South African university. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 15 participants; the senior human resource training and development coordinator and a trade union leader. The study found that there is positive intentionality in the official domain of employee learning at the institution, resulting from the need for agents to collectively re-contextualise the knowledge constituting the employee learning curriculum. Similarly, there was evidence of the positive influence of collective agency in the administrative assistants' responses to institutional employee learning initiatives. However, some tensions were noted between senior management's and administrative assistants' exercise of collective agency in the practice of employee learning. This hampered alignment between the institution's strategic intentions and the administrative assistants' collective employee learning goals. Based on these findings, it is recommended that efforts be made to promote congruence between management's exercise of collective agency in the official re-contextualisation of the employee learning curriculum and the administrative assistants' collective responses to employee learning practices.

Key words: employee learning, administrative assistants, collective agency

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: GEORGE MAVUNGA, University of Johannesburg, South Africa
Email: gmavunga@uj.ac.za

Cette enquête a étudié l'influence de l'agence collective sur la culture de l'apprentissage des employés auprès des assistants administratifs d'une université polyvalente sud-africaine. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'entrevues semi-structurées chez 15 participants, le coordonnateur principal de la formation et du perfectionnement en ressources humaines et le dirigeant syndical. L'étude a révélé qu'à cause de la nécessité qu'ont les agents de recontextualiser de façon collective les connaissances constituant le programme d'apprentissage des employés, il y a dans l'établissement une intentionnalité positive dans le domaine officiel de l'apprentissage des employés. De même, il y avait des preuves de l'influence positive de l'agence collective dans les réactions des adjoints administratifs aux initiatives d'apprentissage institutionnel des employés. Toutefois, certaines tensions ont été observées entre la façon de faire de la haute direction et celle des adjoints administratifs de l'agence collective en matière de pratique de l'apprentissage des employés. Cela a entravé l'harmonisation entre les intentions stratégiques de l'établissement et les objectifs collectifs visés par les adjoints administratifs en matière d'apprentissage des employés. Sur la base de ces constatations, il est recommandé de déployer des efforts pour promouvoir une concordance entre l'exercice mis en œuvre par la direction de l'agence collective pour officiellement recontextualiser le programme d'apprentissage des employés et les réactions collectives des adjoints administratifs à ces pratiques d'apprentissage.

Mots clés: apprentissage des employés, adjoints administratifs, agence collective

Introduction

The advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) with its requirement of flexibility in terms of employees' knowledge and competencies, has made employee learning more of an imperative than ever before. In recent years there has been increased interest in how elements such as choice, intentionality, motivation and perceptions which are unique to the individual and therefore constitute individual agency influence the culture of employee learning (Billet, 2006; Reed, 2003). Nonetheless, the influence of forms of agency which extend beyond the individual such as interdependent and collective commitment to goals, which are some of the elements of collective agency, continue to be of interest to researchers because the dynamism and variation in employees' responses to employee learning initiatives in different structural contexts give rise to unique learning cultures (Jarvis, 2007).

Using Critical Realism (CR) (Bhaskar, 2002, 1998; Mingers, 2014) and drawing insights from Bernstein's (2000) theory of the pedagogic device as

well as the notion of learning domains (Author, 2017), the study on which this article is based sought to establish the influence of collective agency on employee learning at a comprehensive university in South Africa with respect to administrative assistants directly involved in academic work. Collective agency has to do with people's ability to act to achieve a common goal on the basis of common and interdependent motivation (Hardin, 1995). The theory of the pedagogic device suggests that knowledge undergoes change or re-contextualisation in the process of curriculum design and implementation (Bernstein, 2000). Closely related to the pedagogic device, the notion of learning domains posits that extant in organisational settings are different domains in which the culture of employee learning assumes different forms (Mavunga and Cross, 2017).

In the South African context, a comprehensive university is a higher education institution which offers a wide range of qualifications from certificate to diploma level across a wide variety of areas of specialisation such as engineering, the natural sciences, humanities and business sciences. In contrast, universities of technology offer only technologically-oriented programmes (Bunting and Cloete, 2010). Comprehensive universities range in size from 30,000 students, to between 20,000 and 29,999, and 20,000 and below (Bunting and Cloete, 2010).

This article is based on a study carried out at one of the large comprehensive universities which was created from a merger of three historically disparate institutions in 2005, namely, a former whites-only university, the technikon of a white liberal university and a former blacks-only university. The 15 participants were administrative assistants directly involved in academic work such as processing marks; drafting time tables and allocation of venues. They were based on all four of the university's campuses. In order to gain a holistic picture of the culture of employee learning at the institution, interviews were also held with the senior coordinator for human resource training and development (HR T and D) and a trade union leader. The study found that, while there was evidence of positive intentionality arising from collective agency extant in the official domain of employee learning at the institution (normative employee learning structures, policies and programmes), the administrative assistants' collective agency arising from their backgrounds and expressed through their lived professional and social experiences is not given full expression in the social and pedagogic domains of employee learning. This misalignment between these two forms of collective agency creates tensions and contradictions which constrain the full achievement of aligned ambition between the institutional strategic intentions and the administrative assistants' collective employee learning goals.

Problem Statement

When the first democratically elected government assumed power in South Africa in 1994, it found itself saddled with a number of challenges, including inequitable human development. The government has enacted legislation aimed at addressing inequalities through, amongst other measures, employee learning. However, measures such as the Skills Development Act, 97 of 1998; the Skills Development Levies Act, 9 of 1999 and the series of skills development strategies seem to have failed to effectively address the shortage of skilled and competent employees, particularly in the engineering and technology sectors. This has been attributed to a number of factors, including uncritical policy borrowing. For example, as a result of the South African government's adoption of neo-liberal policies in the provision of social services such as higher education, public university governance has been characterised by managerialism (Vally and Motala, 2014). Secondly, the narrow conceptualisation of employee learning which is characteristic of the on-going skills discourse in the country does not take past realities into account. Apartheid legacies are responsible for some groups of employees being unable to claim their stake in work-related learning not only for improved organisational performance but their own socio-economic development as well as that of society at large (Vally and Motala, 2014). The government has also been accused of adopting poorly coordinated and constantly changing approaches to the formulation of skills development legislation (Tembe and Sehume, 2016).

Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) were established to drive work-related learning in various sectors. However, Freeman (2015) bemoans the entrenchment of a tick-box culture which foregrounds conformity with legal requirements without necessarily addressing employees' learning needs based on both their professional and social lived experiences. As a result, the SETAs as well as the government and employers have been accused of producing workers whose performance is not rooted in a strong culture of learning as they are more competent in unit standards than in the actual work they are supposed to do (Freeman, 2015).

In some organisations, stakeholders such as workers' unions which are one of the vehicles through which the collective efforts of employee learning could be exercised, have tended to focus more on immediate bread and butter issues such as salaries and wages (Kiley and Coetzee, 2013). Yet, the legislation provides for their involvement in employee learning, for example, through training committees and works councils. Other factors which impact employee learning such as family backgrounds and the social relationships which employees establish as they participate in employee learning are also not given adequate attention by both the government and employers when they formulate employee learning strategies. Many organ-

isations provide considerable support to mid-level and senior employees, without proportionate support for the work-related needs of junior employees who constitute the majority of the workforce in the country (Kraak, Jewinson, Chidi, Bhawan, Nomvete, and Engelbrecht, 2013). The comprehensive university at which this study was conducted is not immune to these challenges. While institutionalised collective initiatives promote work-related learning among academic staff; for example, the acquisition of Master's and doctoral qualifications, lower-level employees such as administrative assistants are not well-catered for despite the important role they play in academic work. This raises questions as to the influence of factors which extend beyond the individual on the culture of employee learning at the university.

Research Question and Objectives

Against the background of the problem set out above the major research question which the study sought to answer was:

What is the influence of collective agency on the culture of employee learning at the selected comprehensive South African university with respect to administrative assistants involved in the academic project?

Emanating from this question, the objectives were to:

1. Establish the nature of the influence which key structures at the institution have on employee learning with respect to administrative assistants involved in academic work;
2. Characterise the administrative assistants' culture of employee learning on the basis of their response to the influence of collective agency on this culture;
3. Based on the results, suggest ways in which the administrative assistants' culture of employee learning might be enhanced.

The Culture of Employee Learning: Some Insights from the Literature

Coetzee and Schreuder (2014, p. 369) assert that the culture of employee learning is broader than training as it involves "...the acquisition of competence, including knowledge, understanding, values, skills and experience." It is therefore a much more holistic experience which is characterised by opportunities for collaboration amongst employees and on-going regeneration of knowledge through individual initiatives and efforts, on the one hand, and teams, networks, forums and communities of practice on the other. Rebelo and Gomes (2011, p. 173) describe the culture of employee learning as being "...oriented towards the promotion and facilitation of workers' learning, its sharing and dissemination, in order to contribute to organizational development and performance." Likewise, Lim and Joo (2008) define it as a culture characterised by an organisation's ability to

create an environment that is conducive for nurturing, acquisition and transfer of knowledge and modification of behaviour to reflect new competencies and insights which are necessary for the achievement of strategic goals. Despite the role played by the individual in their own learning, implied in them is the critical role played by factors which are collective in nature such as the organisation itself and co-workers.

In terms of the discourse used with regard to employee learning, Fairclough (2007, p. 209) argues that the term 'skill' and related vocabulary such as 'training' and 'competence' have normative, passive and objectifying connotations which imply the commodification of services such as education which ordinarily should not be associated with "... individualist and consumerist rhetoric." Employee learning discourse should therefore, involve more than an individual mastering a pre-packaged set of skills. It should be about how employees as a collective participate in relevant learning programmes which take into account their contextual realities in addition to organisational strategic intentions.

One of the implications of the above discussion is that the culture of employee learning is not only social but also typically complex and emergent. Rather than examining it from a single perspective, the normative one, which is a function of government and employer initiatives, employee learning and the culture that characterises it need to be investigated from the complexity and multiplicity of its dimensions as well as its emergent nature. Biesta, Field, Goodson, Hodkinson, and Macleod (2008) suggest that, in studying employee learning and the culture associated with it, it is necessary to take a holistic approach which examines it from both the organisational and employees-as-a-collective perspectives.

The Culture of Employee Learning: A Critical Realist Perspective

Critical realism emerged as a distinct paradigm in the late 1970s with Roy Bhaskar as one of its leading proponents (Vandenbergh, 2014). It gives priority to the study of existence (ontology) over the study of knowledge itself (epistemology) (Layder, 1993). According to Bhaskar (1989), reality is multi-layered or multi-levelled, with what happens in one layer being responsible for causing what happens at other layers. Vandenbergh (2014, p. 157) adds that CR is "...concerned with the reality of entities, generative mechanisms, deep structures and causal powers." The paradigm thus advocates for an investigation of the causal forces responsible for events at different levels that make up the social world in a bid to fully understand it (Khan, 2009). In CR, culture is defined as "...the set of ideas, beliefs, theories, values, ideologies and concepts which are manifest through discourses used by people at particular times" (Quinn, 2012, p. 29). Therefore, from a CR perspective, the culture of employee learning can be said to

refer to the ideas, beliefs, ideas, theories and values which characterise the practise of learning in the workplace. Amongst other ways, the culture is manifested in the discourse which is used to communicate these elements. Quinn (2012, p. 28) adds that in CR, "The social world is understood to be comprised of the 'parts' (culture and structure) and the 'people' (agents)." According to Boughey (2009), agency is about the capacity which people have to behave in a certain way which they themselves choose. A salient tenet of agency is therefore the intentionality of people's behaviour at the individual or collective levels.

Collective Agency

Although agency can be examined from an individual perspective, it can also be conceptualised from a collective one. Bouvier (2011) problematises this distinction when he notes that the point at which one moves from individual to collective agency is not always clear. Indeed, Ratner (2000) argues that looking at agency as an individual phenomenon is a regression to asocial individualism and suggests, rather, that agency is largely a collective and culturally-dependent phenomenon whose manifestations are dependent on social relations. According to Ratner (*ibid*) this is demonstrated by the argument that the strength of their agency notwithstanding, individuals are not capable of completely ignoring, circumventing or negating society. They therefore only select from that which is present in society. Bordieu (2000) also asserts that through what he refers to as habitus, society imposes rules of behaviour on people's conduct. Society is therefore, an ever-present and necessary condition for intentional human choices and behaviour (Ratner, 2000). Collective agency is thus seen in interdependent commitment to common goals (Sen, 1982; Harden, 1995). Several examples illustrate not only the existence, but the influence of collective agency. These include collective intentionality on the part of sellers who agree to sell within a particular price range to avert the possibility of some of them being forced out of business. Similarly, Searle (1995) states that collective agency is made possible by the existence in human beings of the "we intention" as a result of which, for example, a violinist has to play their part in a symphony. The emergence of language in the evolution of humankind is also given as an example of the existence of collective agency which has resulted in mutually comprehensible communication and many other forms of human development. Finally, collective agency is evident in the need for congruence in behaviour for purposes of survival when society faces a common threat such as a pandemic.

Agency shapes the architecture of the culture displayed by agents in given social structures. This is in keeping with the view in CR that natural and social phenomena should be examined as a plurality of open, stratified,

layered or differentiated systems of objects (structures) which have causal powers (Morton, 2006). It is also in line with Hitlin and Elder's (2006) contention that human beings are endowed with social-psychological capabilities which constitute a form of agency that can be deployed to pursue certain goals. For Bandura (2001), collective agency can be explained in terms of the agentic perspective of the social cognitive theory which points to the reflexive relationship between the individual and the collective. Although Archer (2000) problematises the agency-structure relationship, she acknowledges the relationship between the individual and the group when she refers to what she calls the adult internal or inner conversation on the basis of which individuals establish a link between their own interests and those of the collective for the achievement of common goals.

Drawing insights from Marxist thinking, critical realists assert that in a bid to understand and change the social world, the first step should be to identify the structures constituting it and analyse the historical and social contexts which generate events and discourses (Bhaskar, 2003, 1989; Hartwig, 2007). In investigating the culture of employee learning it is therefore necessary to examine the structural contexts in which it takes place and the influence of the collective agency which different role players are capable of exercising in those contexts to produce such a culture.

Archer (1996) contends that there are basically two systems from which structures derive their agency. The first are normative regulatory systems such as legislation and policies. The second are the informal systems which emerge from agents' interaction with and within structures. In terms of employee learning, an example of informal structures would be learning teams which themselves are a product of the common learning goals which employees in an organisation may be pursuing (Jarvis, 1992). The culture of employee learning is therefore also a function of how employees collectively mediate the often-conflicting interests of formally recognised agents and informal ones (Drinkuth et al., 2003).

Critical realism has a number of implications for the culture of employee learning. For example, the existence of structures in society means that, like school learning, employee learning is not free from institutions such as the government and employer organisations (Jarvis, 1995). At the same time, entities within an organisation such as unions as well formal and informal learning groups all influence the culture of employee learning through various strategies, initiatives or activities.

Bernstein's Pedagogic Device: Implications for the Culture of Employee Learning

In addition to CR, Bernstein's theory of the pedagogic device can be used to shed light on the possible forms that the culture of employee learning

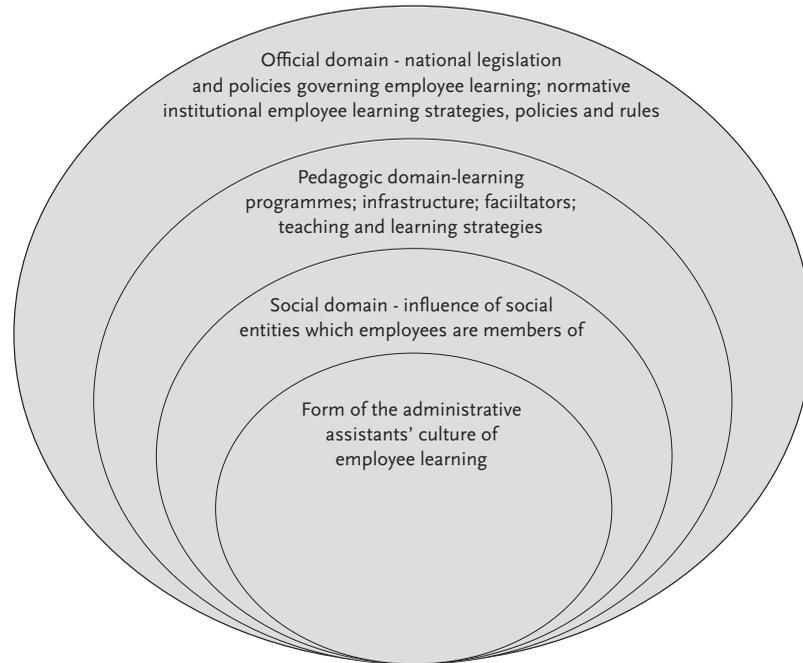
can take. Bertram (2012) notes that the theory of the pedagogic device which was propounded in respect of the curriculum envisages re-contextualisation of knowledge produced at one site when it is transferred and reproduced at other sites. Bernstein (2000) identifies three fields, namely, the fields of production, re-contextualisation and re-production. The field of production represents the site and processes whereby new knowledge which should be in the curriculum is generated, for example, by university and industry experts (Signh, 2002). In the field of re-contextualisation some aspects of the knowledge from the field of production are selected, resulting in the production of pedagogic discourse (Ensor, 2004). The field of re-production is the site where what counts as legitimate knowledge to be delivered to learners is selected, which includes elements such as pedagogy and assessment practices (Bertram, 2012).

According to Bertram (2020), Bernstein distinguishes between the official re-contextualising field and the pedagogic re-contextualising field. The former usually includes state and ministry of education agents who come up with the official curriculum selected from the knowledge produced by experts in a specific field. The latter field normally includes practitioners such as teacher trainers and textbook writers who select what is to be taught in schools from the official curriculum and how it will be taught. Bernstein and Solomon (1999) bring the notion of agency to the theory of the pedagogic device when they suggest that in each of the fields identified in the theory, there are agents who use their positions to seek domination. The fields as well as the policies and rules which operate in them can therefore be regarded as structural contexts which influence the content of the curriculum and, by extension, the resultant culture of learning.

Conceptual Framework

Drawing insights from the pedagogic device and the notion of collective agency in CR this study suggests a conceptual framework for employee learning consisting of three domains in which such learning takes place. As illustrated in Figure 1, these domains are the official, pedagogic and social. The fourth layer in the diagram represents the form of the culture of employee learning which is a function of the influence of what occurs collectively in the three layers outside it.

Figure 1. Conceptualisation of Administrative Assistants' Culture of Employee Learning at the Comprehensive University



The diagram reflects the multi-layered nature of reality discussed earlier (Bhaskar, 2011). The outer layer represents what I refer to as the official domain of employee learning. Examples of agents in this domain are government officials, senior managers and trade union representatives. Through their collective agency, government officials design the legislation, policies and strategies governing employee learning at national level. Senior university managers operating in the field of official re-contextualisation (Bernstein, 2000) collectively select expert human resource management development knowledge that they consider to be worthy of being learnt by the administrative assistants. The outcome of re-contextualisation which takes place in this field represents the culture of employee learning in the official domain.

The second layer in the diagram constitutes what I call the pedagogic domain. I conceptualise this layer as being the equivalent of the pedagogic re-contextualising field. In this layer, agents such as the HR T and D Unit at the comprehensive university and the facilitators whom they contract to run employee learning programmes use their collective agency to select

what will actually be delivered to employees during training sessions. In addition, they select the methods by which the employee learning content will be delivered as well as the resources that will be used to deliver it. The processes involved in the selection of employee learning content, the content itself and how it is delivered, represent the culture of employee learning in the pedagogic domain.

The third layer in the diagram constitutes what I call the social domain. In this domain, I conceptualise the culture of employee learning as being a function of social factors such as the communities of learning which they may establish as they participate in employee learning programmes. It may also be influenced by the administrative assistants' membership of social entities. It is possible for re-contextualisation to take place in this domain as a result of the social entities to which employees belong influencing what is important for employees to learn and what is not. I conceptualise the inner circle as representing the totality of the form of the culture of employee learning which is a function of the different collective influences in each of the layers or domains which represent the structural contexts in which employee learning takes place. The form of this culture needs to be understood in order to determine the extent to which it is congruent with the institutional strategic goals on the one hand, and the employees' lived experiences and collective employee learning goals on the other.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. Denzin and Lincoln (2013, p. 7) note that, "...qualitative research involves an interpretive naturalistic approach to the world." This is in keeping with Brinkinshaw, Brannen and Tung's (2011) view that the qualitative approach is supportive of the philosophical and ontological stance that reality is socially constructed and that it needs to be interpreted from the perspectives of the study participants. In order to interpret the social world, the qualitative researcher needs to study phenomena in the research participants' natural settings. In addition, qualitative research acknowledges that there are multiple realities rather than only one as suggested by positivism (Merriam and Simpson, 1995).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 administrative assistants from different faculties, departments and centres on all four campuses of the comprehensive university. In order to obtain a holistic picture of the culture of employee learning at the institution, semi-structured interviews were also held with the Senior Coordinator of the HR T and D Unit and one trade union representative. One of the strengths of semi-structured interviews is that they enable the researcher to probe for underlying meanings and beliefs (Brinkinshaw et al., 2011).

The 15 administrative assistants were purposively sampled on the basis of their work which involves dealing directly with academic matters. Another selection criterion was that they needed to have been employed by the university for at least two years in the same position. In light of the employee training and development schedule at the university, in two years they would have participated in more than one employee learning programme. There was a wide age range amongst the administrative assistants interviewed with the youngest being 24 and the oldest, 56. While some had joined the university after 2005, others were employed before the merger. Of the 15 administrative assistants, 11 were female and four were male. Despite these differences, there were many points of convergence amongst the administrative assistants in terms of their collective responses to the employee learning programmes at the university.

Close to 200 administrative assistants perform such duties at the comprehensive university at which the study was conducted. The sample size might therefore be considered too small. However, as Omona (2013) argues, in qualitative research the focus is on obtaining carefully detailed descriptions of participants' experiences and perceptions rather than on sample size. Gale, Heath, Cameron, Rashid, and Redwood (2013) further argue that the qualitative approach typically aims to understand the worldviews of a small number of participants rather than to test hypotheses in respect of large samples. However, I was guided by Onwuegbuzie's (2003) advice that in carrying out qualitative research, one should not aim to generalise the results associated with a particular sample to the population from which it is drawn. Patton (2015) concurs and observes that qualitative researchers distrust generalisations. Instead, they immerse themselves in the details of the specific social context which they are studying. The study thus only offers insights into the culture of employee learning in respect of the remainder of the population of administrative assistants at the selected comprehensive university.

The questions in the semi-structured interviews focused on the administrative assistants' experiences of, and collective responses to, employee learning initiatives and programmes in the official, pedagogic and social domains at the comprehensive university. The interviews were recorded electronically and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Such analysis entails the identification and organisation of patterns which emerge from the data in a systematic manner in order to draw insights which help to answer the research questions (Bradley, Curry, and Devers, 2007). Thematic analysis was particularly useful in this study because it enabled the researcher to

discern and interpret participants' collective or shared experiences and the meanings associated with them which lie beneath the surface (Azungah, 2018). In analysing the data, I therefore went beyond obvious commonalities such as the fact that the administrative assistants did the same type of work. Rather, I dug deeper, for example, to understand the similarities in their responses to the ways in which they are expected to attain knowledge and skills to enhance their job performance.

There are two approaches to thematic analysis, namely, deductive and inductive (Azungah, 2018). Bradley, Curry, and Devers (2007) note that the deductive approach makes use of an organising framework made up of themes for coding data. The framework is employed to analyse the data based on the expectation that certain core concepts which the researcher already has in mind will be found (Thomas, 2006). Deductive thematic analysis is therefore a top-down approach. In contrast, inductive thematic analysis adopts a bottom-up approach in which themes emerge from the data themselves. What the researcher maps during the process of coding the data is therefore derived from the data. The findings therefore reflect the content of the raw data rather than predetermined patterns (Thomas, 2006).

Despite the conceptual distinction between the deductive and inductive approaches, in practice, many researchers rely on both (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Before conducting the semi-structured interviews, I developed a conceptual framework consisting of the official, pedagogic and social domains, in which I visualised employee learning taking place. On the basis of the conceptual framework, I asked the participants questions pertaining to their experiences of learning in different learning domains. However, the probing questions helped me to establish in-depth meaning in the administrative assistants' responses to their experiences of employee learning in the identified domains. Some of the themes also emerged from these commonalities.

Results and Discussion

Collective Agency in the Official Domain

The data from the semi-structured interviews showed that some of the similarities in relation to the administrative assistants' participation in employee learning programmes included the dates and times of participation; activities in these programmes and the competencies which it was hoped they would acquire. In this regard, the influence of collective agency was evident in the collaboration that was reported by some of the administrative assistants, for example, in deciding on whether or not to attend the short courses offered by the HR T and D Unit. This was particularly true of administrative assistants working in the same departments where

there would be commonality in dynamics such as the head of department's support for employee learning or lack thereof.

There was, however, a considerable degree of heterogeneity across different departments in terms of the influence of collective agency, for example, in the participants' responses to invitations by the HR T and D Unit to take part in short courses. This was a result of the fact that the selected institution is a comprehensive university that offers various programmes at different levels, with large numbers of students in many departments. Probing questions during the semi-structured interviews revealed that differences in the participants' responses were attributable to factors such as the level and type of programmes offered by departments; management styles in different departments and the fit between departmental work schedules and the times when the short courses are offered. For example, departmental size in terms of student enrolment, the number of lecturers and number of assessments as well as the spread of programmes offered across the four campuses had a direct bearing on the administrative assistants' workloads and therefore the time available to them to participate in some of the employee learning programmes. This resulted in a culture of employee learning whose form was dependent on uniqueness in structural contexts. In this regard, some of the administrative assistants reported frustration at being unable to participate in learning programmes which they wanted to attend as a result of the pressure of work. They blamed senior managers in their departments and faculties for not exercising flexibility as completion of tasks was always prioritised over their participation in employee learning programmes.

In addition to the variations discussed above, in some cases, departmental practices were reported to reflect the institutions which they belonged to prior to the merger. For example, in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment (FEBE), degree programmes are mainly offered at the campus of the former whites-only university while diploma programmes are offered at the campus that used to house the technikon of the former white liberal university. The administrative assistants agreed that serving degree students was not the same as serving those doing diplomas in terms of the amount of administrative support. In many cases, students enrolled in degree programmes take more modules than those enrolled in diploma programmes. More time is therefore needed to, for example, process the former's marks. However, some of the participants argued that diploma students tend to require more psycho-social support. The time constraints arising from providing administrative support to students pursuing studies at different levels were therefore identified as having a bearing on the collective decisions which the administrative assistants make as they take part in employee learning programmes.

The administrative assistants who took part in the study also reported differences in the level of support for work-related learning from superiors such as Faculty Officers and HODs. Some noted high levels of support, while others stated that their superiors strictly adhered to the rules and regulations governing employee learning at the institution, sometimes with detrimental effects on their willingness to engage in such learning. This seemed to be a result of the line managers being on a managerial trajectory in terms of managing employee learning. Again, this created tension between the administrative assistants' preparedness to deploy their agency towards employee learning and the structures in which they operated. This is in keeping with Archer's (2006) contention that there is often tension between agency and structure.

All the participants reported that the performance management system at the institution constrained their ability to collectively use learning as a tool to improve their job performance. Rather, the system emphasises mechanistic ratings which are used to determine performance bonuses. The participants stated this made it difficult for them to leverage their collective motivation for learning for both improved performance, and realisation of career aspirations as some of their achievements in these areas simply go unnoticed. For example, they noted that when some of them applied for promotion, they were told by senior managers that some of the programmes they took part in were not credit-bearing and therefore did not qualify them for promotion. This created the potential for a weak culture of employee learning due to demotivation on the part of the participants as a collective.

The interview with the Senior Coordinator of the HR T and D Unit revealed that there was no training committee at the comprehensive university. This was still the case at the time of writing. The Senior Coordinator attributed this to the fact that the post of Organisational Development Officer was vacant at the time of the interview, and had been for a long time. Consequently, there was no coordination of the activities which would result in the formation of a training committee. Worse still, the trade unions were not playing an active role in employee learning activities. Even though the new training and development policy at the comprehensive university published in 2016 envisaged the formation of a Training and Development Forum that the unions would be an integral part of in line with national legislation governing employee learning, it did not spell out their exact role in the forum. This pointed to a culture of employee learning at the institution characterised by very little, if any attempt by the unions to engender in employees the level of collective agency necessary to cultivate a strong culture of employee learning.

The unions' non-involvement in employee learning at the institution

contradicts Clough's (2012, p. 2) assertion that learning is at the core of unionism and that, "Unions can provide the confidence and trust required for working people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds." The weak culture of employee learning arising from the unions' non-participation has significant potential to perpetuate workplace injustices arising from the legacy of apartheid which are currently aggravated by corruption in both the public and private sectors (Botman, 2012).

In an interview with a union leader, he attributed the unions' non-involvement in employee learning to the fact that there were still, "...bigger battles to be fought at the institution" and noted that all the battles could not be fought at the same time. According to the union leader, two of the bigger battles were improved remuneration, especially for lower level employees and racial transformation as in appointment of staff members from previously disadvantaged racial groups to key positions. Thereafter, attention would shift to other areas of concern, including employee learning. In his words:

This will naturally see the unions not only advocating the formation of such a body as a training committee but also seeking representation on it as required by law. (Interview with union leader)

The unions' lack of agency in influencing the culture of employee learning at the university could explain the top-down approach which is extant in the official re-contextualisation field currently employed by management in the selection of knowledge that constitutes the employee learning curriculum.

The Influence of Political Party Affiliations

In light of South Africans' long history of collective struggle against apartheid, a question that arose in this study was the degree to which the administrative assistants' culture of employee learning was shaped by their affiliation to particular political parties. While some participants reported that they were members of political parties, others said they were not. Similarly, two categories of influence emerged from the interviews, direct and indirect influence. In the case of direct influence, the administrative assistants who said they belonged to a political party saw a direct link between the policies and programmes of the political parties to which they belonged and some of the learning activities which they took part in. For example, one of the administrative assistants explained that, having been born in South Africa in 1978, two years after the Soweto students' uprisings, from an early age, she was conscious of the inequalities in the country because of apartheid policies. Through the political orientation which she and others obtain from their political party, their eyes are opened to the need to take part in work-related learning in order to fulfil

some of the aspirations of those who struggled for democracy, an example of which is socio-economic transformation through collective effort underpinned by technical and professional competencies.

These views are in keeping with the notion that, in addition to unions and formal or informal learning groups, political parties are another component of structure which can engender the collective agency required for employee learning (ETDP SETA, 2014). This is because, through the vehicle of their policies, political parties in government create the economic environment which gives effect to the collective aspirations of members of society. They therefore have the capacity to create the requisite collective agency in different spheres of their members' lives as exemplified by employee learning.

The majority of the administrative assistants who said they did not belong to political parties acknowledged that there was a degree to which politics influences their participation in employee learning activities. They singled out the ruling party, the African National Congress, (ANC) as the chief architect of government policies and programmes. An example is the national legislation governing employee learning. Even if they did not completely subscribe to ANC policies, these participants found themselves collectively affected by the party's policies and programmes. Emerging from this is a culture of employee learning which is characterised by a measure of despondence and contradictions rooted in collective opposition to the ruling party's policies.

The Influence of Membership of Religious Groups

As with political party affiliation, some participants said they belonged to religious groups, while others said they did not. The former perceived a link between their church membership and participation in employee learning activities at the university. Thus, to a certain extent, their culture of learning bore witness to the influence of collective agency whose roots lie in membership of church groups. In response to the question on the influence of her church membership on her participation in employee learning activities, one commented:

Wow...uh I don't know, what can I say, but a way of living, a better way of living. (Interview with Participant I)

Further probing revealed that by a 'better way of living', the participant was referring to cordial relationships with fellow human beings which contribute to harmony in the workplace and ultimately, to greater productivity. She extended this to improvement in the administrative assistants' technical knowledge and interpersonal skills which enable them to work efficiently and harmoniously in teams. Another administrative assistant said that she belonged to the women's group at her church where one of the

values taught is teamwork. She applied this at work both in the execution of her duties and in participation in the employee learning activities initiated by management at the institution. She added that this made it easy for her to take part in group tasks assigned in some of the learning activities. It can therefore be concluded that membership of religious groups can be a source of collective agency whose exercise influenced the administrative assistants' participation in employee learning programmes at the collective level. This exemplifies what Sikhakhane (2016, p. 10) calls, "...spiritual capital". It is also in keeping with Adam Smith's (1759) contention that religion contributes to economic development through its role as a social moral enforcement mechanism (Sikhakhane, 2016).

The Pedagogic Domain: the Influence of Formal and Informal Learning Groups

The participants said that through taking part in employee learning programmes, they had opportunities to participate in group tasks both in and outside the classroom. A question that arose in this regard pertained to the culture of employee learning which arises from their participation in tasks in either formal or informal groups. It emerged that the administrative assistants' culture of employee learning is characteristically reflective of their participation in group activities. The elements making up this culture include collective commitment to completion of tasks; mutual agreement on deadlines for the execution of tasks and the use of intra-group motivational strategies aimed at ensuring full participation by all members.

Some of the participants reported that they related to one another in ways which conform to the definitions and characterisations of groups (Mullins, 2007; Jaque, 2000). For example, they reported a high sense of belonging to the formal learning groups, especially when the courses they attended were designed only for administrative assistants. The shared sense of purpose characteristic of their participation in work-related learning activities manifested in common acknowledgement of how their collective participation in the HR T and D Unit-organised courses enables them to improve their job performance.

The inter-dependence, interaction and cohesiveness that are characteristic of the administrative assistants' culture of work-related learning were evident in that the majority reported that they often helped one another both inside and outside the training room with tasks set by course facilitators. Individuals might find it difficult to accomplish some of the tasks on their own. An administrative assistant remarked that being a member of a group made a significant difference to her participation in the work-related learning programmes offered by the university. This is in keeping with the finding by researchers from eight South African universities who inves-

tigated the interplay of structure, culture and agency in the professional development of academics in higher education institutions in the country. The academics who participated in the study reported reliance on, "... chats with colleagues in tea rooms, reading articles on teaching, the reflective use of student feedback, and trial and error to promote their teaching skills" (Leibowitz, 2015, p. 42). The researchers thus concluded that the development of academic staff needs to be viewed in broader terms than simply learning activities such as workshops and short courses which are formal in nature and assess competence only at the individual level. Other levers that influence professional development, amongst which are collaborative informal learning activities, also require attention. Agents who constitute the pedagogic re-contextualising field who operate in both the official and pedagogic domains of the employee learning curriculum for administrative assistants could draw insights from this recommendation which alludes to the influence of collective agency on the culture of learning which employees engage in.

In participating in employee learning programmes intended for administrative assistants only, the participants would be members of groups whose existence is governed by certain rules and procedures (Toseland and Rivas, 2002). For example, before they attend any training course organised by the HR T and D Unit, they must formally respond to an advertisement of the course through their HODs. If they do not follow the necessary procedures, they cannot participate in the training. Other aspects of this formality include the insistence that they cannot arbitrarily withdraw from a course they have registered for; the requirement that they complete any course they register for; the need to evaluate any course they attend and the certification which accompanies attendance of any course. The culture of employee learning arising from their participation in such programmes is therefore characterised by formality and acquiescence to the collective agency of agents in the official domain of employee learning. However, it emerged in the interviews that this was often characterised by collective passive resistance due to aversion to the formality and expectation of the administrative assistants to comply with the authority of the senior managers at the comprehensive university.

In general, the administrative assistants expressed confidence and trust in the course facilitators. In the words of one:

The people [facilitators] whom they [HR Training Unit] bring in to run the courses are very good at what they do. (Participant O)

Such confidence and trust in agents who make up the pedagogic re-contextualisation field makes for a strong culture of employee learning, rendering the administrative assistants likely to respond positively to future requests to take part in employer-initiated learning activities.

The administrative assistants also sometimes become members of natural groups that have no specific criteria (Toseland and Rivas, 2012). For example, for completion of tasks, the administrative assistants can join groups on the basis of being colleagues in the same department; age or gender. This has implications for the culture of employee learning in that, for example, their ability to complete tasks is dependent on the intra-group dynamics within the natural group to which they belong. Their culture of employee learning is therefore dependent on the extent to which collective agency is exercised within the natural group which they join.

Participation in employee learning programmes also made the administrative assistants members of an education group. Their realisation of this fact contributed to the formation of a positive culture of employee learning through a focus on the learning programmes and doing all it takes to complete them. As one said:

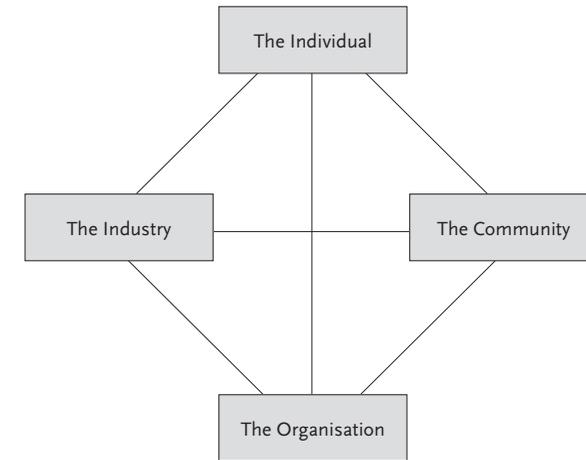
The university invests a lot of resources into these courses so we have to be seen to be serious. Besides, the courses are an opportunity for us to improve ourselves. We must therefore be serious when we go for them. (Participant A)

This confirms the suggestion that, the purpose for which a group is formed, for example, task completion, socialisation, growth, self-help and education can serve as a rallying point for all group members to exert themselves for the achievement of group goals (Toseland and Rivas, 2012).

The assistance which the administrative assistants offer one another contradicts the foregrounding of the role of individual agency in employee learning (Defillipi et al., 2006; Billet, 2006; Reed, 2003). This is because components of the process of knowledge acquisition at work such as informal groups and the organisation itself strongly mediate the culture of employee learning in different organisations. In this regard, Defillipi et al. (2006) suggest what they refer to as a *knowledge diamond*. This is illustrated in Figure 2 below, which shows that the acquisition of knowledge by an individual employee takes place within the context of the industry to which his or her organisation belongs, the organisation itself and the community.

The diagram shows the relational interdependence of these components and by implication, their contribution to the culture of employee learning which develops in an organisation. Learning groups which are either formally created by course facilitators or emerge informally as part of the learning process as one of the entities which make up the community, produce collective agency which plays a crucial role in the formation of the culture of employee learning. The interviews with the administrative assistants revealed the collaborative nature of the culture of employee learning, especially as the administrative assistants take part in group tasks. As one noted:

Figure 2. The Knowledge Diamond (adapted from Defillipi et al., 2006, p, 62)



We help each other with exercises which we are given either to do at home or when we have to give feedback later on in class. (Participant M)

Such collaboration enhances the administrative assistants' work-related learning with respect to, for example, motivation and their ability to grasp concepts. Their willingness to participate in work-related activities is therefore likely to be enhanced and their culture of learning will be strengthened. It is, however, important to note that its positive influence on the culture of employee learning notwithstanding, the group may not be the most dominant component of the knowledge diamond. In a situation where, for example, the organisation wields significant power, its influence may neutralise that of the group when it comes to shaping the culture of employee learning. This was confirmed by some of the participants. They expressed frustration at limited opportunities to engage one another in groups due to time constraints imposed by pressure of work. In some cases, family commitments, especially amongst young female participants with young families were cited as an added constraint, with a diminishing effect on their collective agency.

Conclusion

This article argued that there is positive intention on the part of senior management at the selected comprehensive university to facilitate employee learning among administrative assistants directly performing academic-related work. This is evident in, for example, the short courses organised for these administrative assistants. Senior management's intentions are

expressed through their collective agency as they, for example, participate in the official re-contextualisation of the knowledge which human resource experts deem important for administrative assistants to acquire. The study's results also showed that the administrative assistants' culture of employee learning benefits from their own collective agency, for example, through learning in groups and their membership of social entities such as religious groups and political parties. However, the benefits that could accrue to the culture of employee learning at the university in respect of the administrative assistants have yet to be fully realised. This is due to factors such as the unions' non-involvement in the employee learning project at the university as they are primarily focused on employee benefits and positions at the expense of acquisition of agency-transforming knowledge and competencies. Secondly, the study established that some tensions exist between senior management's exercise of collective agency, for example, when they decide which employee learning programmes administrative assistants should take part in as well as when and how they should do so, on the one hand, and some of the administrative assistants' collective responses to these programmes, on the other. These tensions are constraining the full realisation of aligned ambition between senior management and the administrative assistants with respect to employee learning. Finally, in some cases, structures such as faculties and departments are still on a managerial trajectory that is largely premised on Human Capital Theory. This trajectory ignores the need to align the relationship between initiatives and decisions taken in the official domain of learning with the administrative assistants' lived experiences with respect to workplace learning as reflected by what actually takes place in the social and pedagogic domains. Institutionalisation of the collaborative role of different stakeholders involved in employee learning is thus recommended in order to build a strong, sustainable culture of such learning at the institution with respect to the administrative assistants. The first step in this regard would be creating congruence between the policies and strategies in the official domain of employee learning and the administrative assistants' collective choices and strategies for engaging in work-related learning. This could go a long way towards aligning different sets of collective agency which is necessary for the leveraging of employee learning for the attainment of the institution's strategic goals in the long term.

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