Trio: An Emerging Model of Adult Professional Learning

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Abstract: Based on research conducted over the past 6 years, the authors offer a model that depicts the key features of professional learning. The model is based on the proposition that optimal professional learning is possible when specific individual attributes, environmental affordances, and key experiences intersect.

Background

Workforce development is a national concern. According to the US Department of Labor, today's adult learner will hold 10-14 different jobs before the age of 38. Additionally, organizations in all sectors require performance from their workers that is innovative, flexible, and cost effective. Because of these requirements adults must learn continuously throughout their careers. Typical classroom-based approaches to enhancing professional learning, however, do not effectively address these learning needs (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Suk Yoon, 2001). Classroom-based practices typically explain 10% or less of the variance associated with outcomes such as transfer of learning and changes in professional behavior (Ford & Weissbein, 1997). A growing body of research in a variety of areas, including informal workplace learning, tacit knowledge management, and expertise points to key roles that learning through experience and person-environment interactions play in professional learning. The research highlights the need to move professional learning practice out of the classroom and into the workplace. The research also brings to light a void in models that can guide practitioners in supporting optimal learning in work settings and professional contexts.

The Trio Model of Professional Learning

The Trio Model depicts the factors and relationships associated with optimal professional learning. The model represents a synthesis of research conducted by the authors and graduate students with whom they have worked over the past 6 years. The model's name derives from three interrelated components that contribute to professional learning: individual attributes, key experiences, and environmental affordances. Individual attributes that appear to be strongly related to professional learning include metacognitive knowledge about what one knows and needs to know (Vallieres, 2007); self-regulation of learning through goal-setting, planning, monitoring, and calibrating performance (Enos, Kehrhahn, & Bell, 2003); and variable orientations to motivation (Ndoye, 2003). Key experiences must occur in the social context of work (Enos et al., 2003), engage prior experience (Sheckley & Bell, 2005), and support analogical reasoning (Lowe, 2007). Key experiences result in
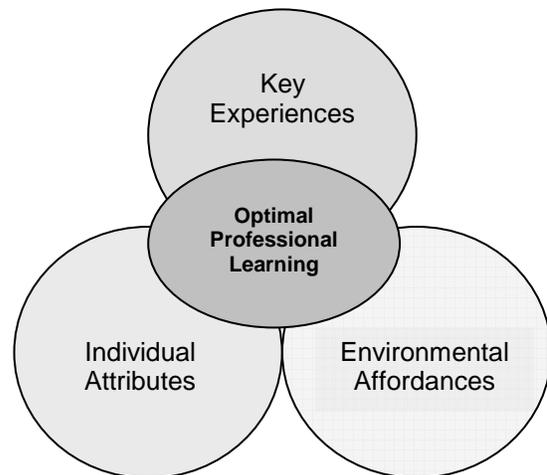
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increased complexity in individual mental models and tacit knowledge (Eckert & Bell, 2006). In addition, work environments must afford feedback, challenges, and supports (Grenier & Kehrhahn, in press; Sheckley & Bell, 2005).

In the Trio Model, the three components—individual attributes, key experiences, and environmental affordances—are both mutually determined and reciprocal. Individual attributes affect engagement in key experiences and shape perceptions of environmental affordances. In turn, key experiences impact mental models that inform metacognition and self-regulation strategies and the social construction of knowledge. In the environment, feedback, challenges, and supports provide opportunities to test assumptions underlying mental models and affect individual motivation. The model describes a forth component—the learning space where all three components are present—and suggests that optimal professional learning is possible only when it simultaneously attends to the individual attributes, key experiences, and environmental affordances described above.

Significance

A critical need exists for a model that practitioners can use to support effective and efficient professional learning in genuine work contexts. The Trio Model of Professional Learning shows promise in addressing this need. The model is grounded empirically and consistent with theories that emphasize the multidimensional and interdependent nature of individual, social, and organizational learning. Many opportunities exist for researchers and practitioners to test and refine the model.

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