

# Sustaining Knowledge in SMEs: Learning as a Moderator in Knowledge Sharing

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## Abstract

Most organizations today have come to accept the value of knowledge as a form of strategic advantage for products or service enhancement. In fact, knowledge is one of the main critical resources for wealth creation and the crucial factor for being competitive advantage. Thus, important knowledge must be retained in organizations before this knowledge could be lost through redundancy, retirement, resignation and even through promotion. Therefore, knowledge sharing has been recognized as a positive force to sustain knowledge in an organization. In view of this, knowledge could be acquired through knowledge sharing process during workplace learning. Workplace learning is able to ensure acquisition of knowledge necessary for the daily work process purpose and at the same time to provides impetus of new knowledge through the collaborative activities amongst employees of an organization as a whole. By reviewing the relevant literature, this paper explores the impact of workplace learning activities on knowledge sharing. It identifies the conceptual process of workplace learning that the authors believe could provide basis for the enhancement of knowledge sharing. Thus, the paper identifies the conceptual process of workplace learning that the author believes the potential of workplace learning to enhance knowledge sharing among employees in Small Medium and Enterprise (SMEs). Finally, the paper proposes the workplace learning as a new direction to enhance knowledge sharing among employees.

*Keywords:* Knowledge, learning; workplace learning, knowledge sharing, SMEs

## Abstrak

Kebanyakan organisasi mengakui bahawa nilai pengetahuan merupakan satu kelebihan yang strategik untuk meningkatkan produk atau perkhidmatan. Malah, pengetahuan merupakan salah satu sumber utama untuk mencipta kekayaan dan faktor penting untuk berdaya saing. Maka, pengetahuan yang penting mesti dikekalkan di dalam organisasi sebelum pengetahuan ini hilang melalui pemberhentian, persaraan, perletakan jawatan dan kenaikan pangkat. Lantaran itu, perkongsian pengetahuan telah dikenal pasti sebagai satu kuasa untuk mengekalkan pengetahuan di sesebuah organisasi. Pengetahuan boleh diperolehi melalui proses perkongsian pengetahuan semasa interaksi harian dan pembelajaran di tempat kerja. Maka, pembelajaran di tempat kerja berkemampuan untuk memastikan pemerolehan pengetahuan yang diperlukan adalah untuk melakukan kerja-kerja harian dan pada masa yang sama merangsang pengetahuan yang baru melalui kerjasama dan perhubungan di kalangan pekerja. Melalui kajian-kajian lepas, kertas ini menerokai kesan pembelajaran di tempat kerja terhadap perkongsian pengetahuan. Ia menyenaraikan konsep pembelajaran di tempat bekerja dimana pengarang percaya pembelajaran di tempat kerja berpotensi untuk meningkatkan perkongsian pengetahuan di kalangan pekerja terutama di Industri kecil dan Sederhana (IKS). Akhirnya, kertas ini mencadangkan bahawa pembelajaran di tempat kerja merupakan satu arah baru untuk meningkatkan perkongsian pengetahuan di kalangan pekerja.

*Kata kunci:* Pengetahuan, pembelajaran, pembelajaran di tempat kerja, perkongsian pengetahuan; IKS

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is needed for being competitive in business development and become one of the main critical resources and the crucial factor in an organization (Anitha, 2006). In other words, some of knowledge cannot be expressed or it is highly personal to formalize, but some knowledge can be expressed and exist in textual form and easily stored. In view of the personalized and tacit nature of some knowledge, knowledge sharing is needed to explain clearly to others. In other words, workplace learning can be a medium for transferring knowledge from owners of knowledge to other employees. Therefore, workplace learning offered riches of work experiences to create and enhance knowledge among employees because workplace learning directed towards workplace requirements to transform work practices and specific needs in the workplace (Billet and Choy, 2013). Lately, there is growing interest in discussing workplace learning among academicians and practitioners because work experiences playing important roles in working life. Moreover, workplace learning provided conceptual and procedural accounts for adult learning in and throughout working life (Billet, 2010). Thus, the employee skill could be enhanced through workplace learning and at the same time sustain their employability throughout their working lives.

Unfortunately, knowledge could be lost whenever an employee leaves an organization through retirement, resignation and even through promotion (Al-Hawamdeh, 2003; Ju *et al.*, 2006). Since, knowledge is now considered a factor of production, it must stay in the organization in order to ensure the organization's strategic advantage. Thus, knowledge sharing is very important component because the critical outcome of knowledge sharing is the creation of new knowledge to improve organizational performance (Al-Hawamdeh, 2003; Pasher and Ronan,

2011; Liu, 2008). Moreover, important knowledge could be retained in organizations through knowledge sharing. The aim of the paper is to know about the nature of workplace learning in an organization. Thus, the theoretical insights in this paper are based on a multidisciplinary combination of workplace learning approach and knowledge sharing process. These concepts will provide greater understandings about workplace pedagogic approaches, and how individual's cognition is enacted and learnt through work activities. Furthermore, this paper will contribute to create understanding regarding the process of knowledge sharing in SMEs. The clarified concept of knowledge sharing will assist SMEs to create understanding on how knowledge sharing activities, engage in workplace activities to change or transform current work practices and finally enhance company performance.

## ■2.0 THE CONCEPT OF LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Learning is defined as the conscious and unconscious activities by individuals, groups or organizations to transform information into knowledge and belief (Lappia, 2011; Jarvis, 2006). Since learning is continuous processes, it can appear in social interaction between people, reflection and experience at any places such as at the workplace, community, and so on (Lappia, 2011; Jarvis, 2004). Moreover, learning process occurs when individual encounters an alternative perspective and earlier habits of mind into questions (Cranton, 2006) and make individual's thinks about themselves and changes their world consciousness (Corley, 2008). However, the learning process is depending to the readiness level of learners and the past practices of the organization (Raelin, 1998). In fact, learning is affected by individual's experiences where they learn from the consequences of their own or other's action to develop new knowledge or behaviors (Mezirow, 1990; Wan *et al.*, 2008). From a social learning theory perspective, learning has been defined as the ideas of reflection upon experience, cognition and emotion (Jarvis, 2006), which people can learn through observations of what other people do (Ormrod, 2004). Furthermore, the social life and psychological life interact as part of learning and it is situated in social institutions, social groups and social class (Jordan *et al.*, 2008).

Knowledge sharing refers to the communication of all types of knowledge, which includes explicit and tacit knowledge through socialization, interaction, and training. Knowledge sharing is the most valuable and essential activity (Park and Lee, 2014; Al-Hawadeh, 2003) and the most important and critical steps in knowledge management activities (Lee and Ahn, 2006; Du *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, according to Liu (2008), knowledge sharing is one of the core organizational activities and it can be used successfully as organization competitive competencies against its rival. Knowledge sharing is very important because the interactions among workers allow the exchange and creation of tacit knowledge (Pasher and Ronan, 2011). Effective knowledge sharing involves the actions of transmission and absorption of the sender and receiver respectively. Therefore, organizations are risking to lose the money, time, and ability when they did not have knowledge sharing effectively (Jones, 2007). Thus, the goal of knowledge sharing is to acquire knowledge for knowledge using in daily work processes to improve the collaboration and relationships among workers and to enhance the accumulation of knowledge for employees and the organization as a whole (Lee and Yu, 2011).

Today, knowledge sharing has been recognized as a positive force for company survival because knowledge can be lost through redundancy, retirement, resignation and even through promotion. Thus, knowledge sharing is closely related to long-run performance and the competitiveness of a firm (Du *et al.*, 2007). Researchers have found that knowledge sharing will improve the collaboration and relationships among workers (Lee and Yu, 2011); and subsequently ensure social trust among members in an organization (Park and Lee, 2014). Furthermore, the knowledge sharing among workers allow the exchange and creation of new knowledge (Pasher and Ronan, 2011) which is the birthplace for innovative ideas and products or services (Rahman, 2011; Tan and Azzat, 2010; Fink and Ploder, 2009). Additionally, knowledge sharing is able to ensure sustainability of important knowledge, preservation of organizational memory (Rahman, 2011) and improvement of organizational performance and effectiveness (Hsu, 2008; Du *et al.*, 2007; Yang, 2007; al-Hawamdeh, 2003).

## ■3.0 WORKPLACE LEARNING

Workplace learning can be conceptualized as a social contribution (Billett, 2008) and serves as the prevailing mode of skills and competence development for employees to maintain skills throughout working life for work transitions (Billet, 2010; Loogma, 2004). Generally, workplace learning can be understood through participating in work activities as independence negotiation between social and personal factors. Thus, workplace learning could be a good medium or a good place for knowledge sharing practice. However, there is a little evidence about the pattern of learning in organizations (Loogma, 2004) especially in SMEs. Most of SMEs are not able to invest enough to provide training for their employees because of non-existing training budgets, ownership and control, fear of poaching, and pressure of growth, and size (Loogma, 2004; Hendry *et al.*, 1995). Consequently, companies that are unable to maintain a cost need to shift to knowledge and learning as innovative ways to use resources. Moreover, knowledge and learning are the central to the concept of continuous improvement in new product development. Then, to be competitive, SMEs need to make internal changes to deal with the changing of business environment customer preferences (Miller, 2005). According to Tynjala (2008), workplace learning may happen through individuals, groups, expert guidance or whole organizations by participating in various work practices, collaborations and meet new challenges

Workplace learning could be as a process of relational interdependence between the affordance of the workplace and the engagement of workers (Billet, 2008). Thus, individual learning appears through social interactions amongst individuals, reflections and experience at workplace to create a new knowledge (Raelin, 1998). Therefore, individual learning arises from complex contributions and negotiation between social and personal factors (Billet, 2008) and related to environments, experiences and reflections practice in organizations. Hence, individual learning is very important to adapt in work towards individual knowledge development and to increase competencies (Lappia, 2011). Moreover, individuals can continue to develop their knowledge when they actively construe and construct the meaning (Billet, 2008) because thinking processes offers a powerful stimulus to analyse current and future knowledge flow (Huysman and Wit, 2002). Particularly, employees might be encouraged to individually experimented in their own work setting through past job experiences with some ideas to bring up (Raelin, 1998). Meanwhile, discussion might encourage employees to individually reflect upon their own jobs to bring in new ideas to practice in their workplace.

Reflection is one type of explicit individual learning of stepping back from experience to ponder and express the meaning to self and to others (Raelin, 2008; Daudelin, 1996). Therefore, reflection plays a special role in drawing meaning from experience (Boud *et al.*, 1993).

Furthermore, reflection process is needed to draw meaning from experience because learners must recapture and re-evaluate their experience to turn it into learning (Jarvis, 2005; Boud *et al.*, 1993). In other words, reflection happens when individual engaging an experience from outside and turns it inside the mind to make connections with other experiences (Daudelin, 1996). Reflection happens through our job routine when we analysed and reflected our experiences through reports, performance review and problem solving process (Daudelin, 1996) or in our personal lives through discussion with friends, parents, spouse and counsellors. When we stop and reflect, we are at the best capture of what we had already learned tacitly in the past and our learning may be continued beyond that point of capture Raelin (2008). According to Mezirow (1990), reflection is the most significant learning process for adulthood because it's related to the evaluation of experiences and transforms the new perspective. Furthermore, reflection is a key part of experiential learning because of learning from experience need us to examine and analyses that experience (Fry *et al.*, 2009).

Learning is built on and flows from experience because learning only can occur if the experience of the learner is engaged (Boud *et al.*, 1993). Working with experience is one of the keys for learning. Moreover, learning from experience, process, and practices leads to the creation of knowledge and generates new ideas and concepts to improve an organization's productivity (Al-Hawamdeh, 2003). Thus, learning from knowledge and experience is considered as an essential element and would contribute to business improvements (Law and Ngai, 2008). According to Kolb experiential learning cycle, the process of learning begins when individuals actively experience and involved fully in an activity in concrete experience stage. Then, learners consciously reflect back on their experience from a different perspective in reflection and observation stage. Finally, learners try to conceptualize and integrate the new ideas into logical theories and finally trying to use a model or concept for a forthcoming experience in new situations. Our experience can contribute significantly to our reflection. However, reflective practice tends to probe to a deeper level than trial and error experience (Raelin, 2008). How do we practice reflection in the workplace, depend on our situation or condition. In the learning team structure, the people who engage in similar work in the group tend to encounter similar difficulties, questioning the problem and offer practical suggestions to others. Thus, at the same time, the people in the group could learn how to manage their own problems.

Learning in groups offers a distinct set of advantages in workplace learning. Beside contribution to the project operations, members may also develop a personal development plan for an individual according to the teams' feedback. The purpose of working in groups and teams is to promote knowledge sharing and thus to enhance individuals' learning. Hence, the ability to learn in collaboration within and outside organization often contributes to the company successful (Tynjala, 2008). Furthermore, groups learning provide many opportunities for members to develop their interpersonal and professional skills because learning in groups explicitly focuses on member's development (Raelin, 2008). Moreover, learning in groups allows members to engage in critical reflection of the assumptions underlying actions in their organizations. When the group members produce ideas and questions, it will stimulate others to see the issues in a slightly different way or put the problem in a new context which will help them to remember (Taylor and Furnham, 2005). Therefore, interaction between novices and experts is crucial importance in the workplace to provide guidance and observe the ways of doing the job. Furthermore, learning process would be difficult without the assistance from experienced and knowledgeable workers because employees commonly learn by working with their colleague (Tynjala, 2008). Moreover, individuals' often learn new knowledge in social situations because of having access to direct guidance by expert partner to enhance the scope of novice's learning through joint problem solving and support (Van and Poell, 2010).

#### ■4.0 THE PROCESS OF LEARNING IN KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Knowledge sharing occurs between at least two parties through face to face communication such as workshop, forums, conferences and seminar (McAdam And Reid, 2000; Hendriks, 1999; Nonaka, 1994). Therefore, knowledge sharing involves the actions of transmission and absorption by the sender and potential receiver respectively. Interactions among workers allow the exchange and creation of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is in people's heads. Thus, will be expressed effectively through interacting and responding to new situations and problems. Learning can be derived from the knowledge sharing cycle through internalization and externalization processes. Internalization is the process of learning from organization and takes place by acquiring organizational knowledge through the use of knowledge systems, training sessions, and manual (Huysman and Wit, 2002). According to Hendriks (1999), internalization presumes an act of those seeking to acquire knowledge through different forms, including learning by doing, reading books, or trying to understand the codified knowledge. However, according to Nonaka *et al.*, (2000), internalization happens when explicit knowledge can be transferred into tacit knowledge. That's mean, when explicit knowledge disseminates throughout an organization, it will convert into tacit knowledge by individuals.

During externalization, the knowledge owner will share knowledge through performing an action based on his knowledge and explaining it in a lecture or codifying it to explicit knowledge (Hendriks, 1999). The knowledge externalization occurs through reusing existing knowledge and renewing or generating new knowledge (Huysman and Wit, 2002). Furthermore, adaptation of external knowledge occurs through reacting to information given or by learning from an experience. Therefore, externalization can take place via formal channels such as meetings and project groups and through informal channels such as conversations or personal interactions (Huysman and Wit, 2002). According to Nonaka *et al.*, (2000), the tacit knowledge can be transferred into explicit knowledge through an externalization process. Furthermore, an objectification takes place at a lower pace in a part of knowledge-sharing processes. This means, the knowledge exchange does not mean that shared knowledge has collective acceptance because shared knowledge only turns into organizational knowledge when it is accepted by the organization's members. Thus, generating new knowledge involves a renewed learning process, however, reusing knowledge is a learning process with the purpose of adjusting and adapting knowledge.

#### Learning as a Moderator

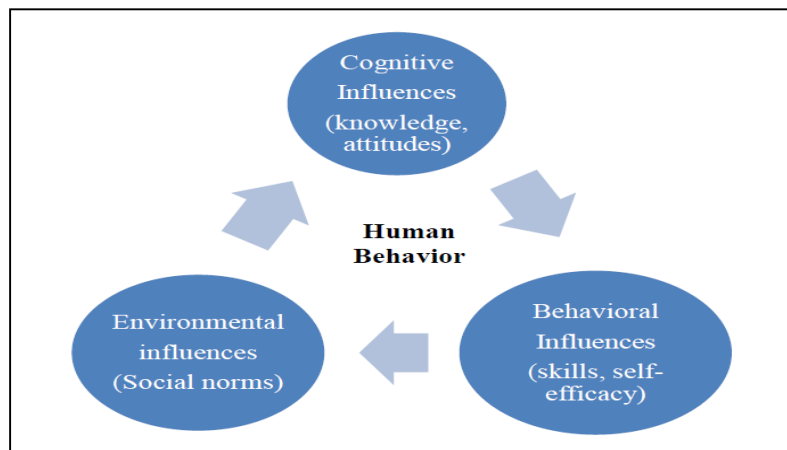
Knowledge sharing is possible when team members share the ideas, information and suggestions with each other (Eze *et al.*, 2013). However, people are willing to share knowledge that is task-related when they perceived knowledge sharing as a socially good initiative (En, 2011), but are unwilling if there is a possibility of erosion of power held by them, which makes themselves become less valuable (Wu and Zhu, 2012; Zhang and Ng, 2012; En, 2011; Anitha, 2006). Hence, the general problem faced by SMEs related to knowledge sharing has been the hoarding of knowledge by the expert in order to remain relevant (Wu and Zhu, 2012). Most of knowledge is kept in the heads of the owner-manager or other employees who are the key holders of knowledge in companies (Wong and Aspinwall, 2004). Consequently, knowledge

will be lost if the employees or owner-manager leave or retire from the company (Al-Hawamdeh; 2003, Ju *et al.*; 2006). Hence, SMEs must know how to ensure that their valuable knowledge could be preserved through the appropriate knowledge sharing process to ensure that knowledge was not lost if their employees left or retired from the company.

In an attempt to provide solutions to knowledge sharing endeavours in organizations, researchers have tried looking at both the individual psychological and the organizational perspectives. However, these results are inconsistent and at times contradict each other. In fact, meta-analysis of those studies indicated some disparity in the conclusions drawn by the authors. For examples, En (2011) and Eugene (2010) studies indicated that self-efficacy does not significantly influence knowledge sharing behavior. However, Al-Qadhi (2013); Zhang and Ng (2012) and Fathi *et al.* (2011) studies revealed that self-efficacy has direct and significant influence on knowledge sharing; i.e. a direct contrast of the earlier conclusion. Furthermore, many of the researchers (En, 2011; Wu and Zhu, 2012; Zhang and Ng, 2012; Fathi *et al.*, 2011; Chatzoglou and Vraimaki, 2009; Anitha, 2006; Terlokchand, 2010) discovered that individual attitude influence knowledge sharing behavior. However, Habeeba (2010) found that attitude did not influence knowledge sharing. According to the contrast finding from the past researchers, this paper concluded that the presence of those factors that promote knowledge sharing do not necessarily guaranteed the success of knowledge sharing.

In view of this, workplace learning could be a moderator for enhancing knowledge sharing in SMEs. According to the individual psychological theory, an individual behavior could be changed via learning interaction of an individual with his or her environment (Bornsheuer-Boswell *et al.*, 2013). Thus, learning will contribute to modify or change behavior due to experience or changes in the environment (Chance, 2014). Furthermore, the behaviorism learning theory also opines that people's behavior changed when they are involved in stimuli and response from their environments (Ormrod, 1995). Thus, individual behavior is affected by the degrees they contributed in learning and the result of learning will translate into observable or changed behavior (Cheramie and Simmering, 2010; Hergenbahn and Olson, 2008). What has already been learned, affecting how people act and think (Crossan, Lane and White, 1999). Social learning theory indicates that people can learn through observations of what other people do (Ormrod, 2004). Furthermore, social learning theory proposes that social life and psychological life interact as part of learning and it is situated in social institutions, social groups and social class (Jordan *et al.*, 2008). Thus, this theory means all learning occurs as a result of social interactions and environment which would lead to the certain behaviors. This theory postulates that the combination of human behavior, breed to a formulation of certain outcomes and the expectation will lead to the decision of one's behavior (Eugene, 2010). This means that individuals will make decisions to exhibit certain behavior according to social network and the environment.

From the social learning perspective, individual, social and environmental factors will increase the level of self-efficacy to perform certain activities. In the context of knowledge sharing, when environment and other factors are favorable, individual self-efficacy and altruism would increase to share his or her knowledge with others. Thus, environmental factors represent situational influences towards personal factors such as knowledge, instinct, attitude and other individual motivational forces. Figure 1 illustrated that human behavior could be determined through cognitive, environmental and behavioral influences.



**Figure 1** Influences of human behavior based on Social Learning Theory (Wachob, 2012, p.15)

According to previous researchers, there are many factors that are believed to play a key role in promoting knowledge sharing behavior. However, the presence factors do not necessarily indicates the success of knowledge sharing whereas some of the factors showed inconsistent results. This means that the owners of SMEs need to understand the factors that are very important in influencing and encouraging knowledge sharing. Furthermore, this indicates that there is a variable that has not been identified and must be viewed in comprehensive ways. According to Bornsheuer-Boswell *et al.* (2013), individual behavior could be changed via learning interaction of the individual with his or her environment. Since human behavior is a result of learning, the workplace learning needs to be more clarifying. This means, learning will contribute to modify or change individual intention toward knowledge sharing behavior. Hence, the paper proposed to examine a moderating effect of workplace learning towards knowledge sharing behavior for further clarifications.

## ■5.0 CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

In knowledge-based economy, the firm that integrated knowledge and learning in their resources tend to achieve higher capabilities to success. Thus, workplace learning could develop employees' skills, and at the same time promoting knowledge sharing through independence negotiation among individuals. In accordance to foregoing review, learning in the workplace appears through social interactions amongst individuals, reflections and experience at the workplace (Raelin, 1998; Tynjala, 2008). Therefore, learning arises from complex contributions and negotiation between social and personal factors (Billet, 2008) and related to environments, experiences and reflections practice in organizations. Thus, learning exists through knowledge sharing activities among employees. According to Hendriks (1999), knowledge sharing acts by those who have the knowledge to take or performing an action based on his knowledge and explaining it in a lecture or codifying it to explicit knowledge. For example, knowledge sharing will exist when expert provides guidance and observe the ways of novices doing their job through workplace learning. Then, when knowledge exists in novices, it will enhance confidence in their ability and capability to achieve tasks and reach goals. According to previous studies, the people who have high self-efficacy should be more likely to perform a knowledge sharing behavior in future, than those with low degree of self-efficacy.

Workplace learning is not just for experiencing, trying and refining knowledge because it is referred to being pedagogically and purposive for learning in the workplace, such as activities, interactions, artefacts and others (Billet, 2010). Furthermore, the arrangement of learning is internally consistent when we facilitate an accumulating level of knowledge acquisition and learning environment. Hence, it needs to identify curriculum and pedagogical practices to sustain workplace learning for both novices and experienced workers to maintain currency of knowledge (Billet and Choy, 2013). Furthermore, the researchers suggested the social implication such as learning by experience, reflection, and social interaction should be combined in joint work related learning arrangements to obtain the most impact on the ability to transfer (Lappia, 2011). In order to create understanding how learning in the workplace proceeds, it is necessary to determine how individuals elect to engage in work activities, and provided support and guidance to afford them (Billet, 2002). Besides, workplace pedagogic practices may be understood through a consideration of reciprocal participatory practice at work and particular interests within the workplace. A broader understanding about workplace learning will assist those responsible for organizing learning in the workplace and transforms work practices to increase performance.

According to the foregoing discussion, a framework for workplace learning need to consider a personal epistemologies and learners interested in imperative efforts aligned with learning throughout work life (Billet, 2010). A dynamic framework forms learning process are combined through individual learning and group learning which encounter relational interdependence between social and personal factors in the workplace. These included considerations about what should be provided to support individual to engage and participate in learning through framing considerations that is applicable for adult learning. Then, the framework for workplace learning should critically examine the kind of learning and that are arisen through participation in work (Billet, 2010). According to Pilla (2011), learning by experience, social interaction and reflection should be combined in joining work to obtain the most impact on the ability of knowledge creation. Furthermore, the clarifying of workplace learning will provide enough explanation to SMEs because normally SMEs have limited information about learning. Hopefully, the clarifications concept of workplace learning will assist SMEs to create understanding how learning activities, engage in workplace activities to change or transform current work practices and finally enhance company performance. According to SMEs' work condition, learning in the workplace could be more effective and favourable for SMEs firms in order to train or teach their employees with new knowledge or skill. Thus, this paper could provide a new perspective about workplace pedagogies which stand as a key premise for workplace learning. While understanding workplace learning is needed to account for the mediating contributions in the workplace, it also needs to accommodate the multitude and individually constructed bases for simulations or cognitive experiences. The relationship between the personal and social contributions to workplace learning warrant further investigation because the mediating factors such as situation, society and culture are central to understanding, learning and advancing the knowledge and skills required for work. These emerging conceptual challenges and contributions offered by workplace learning through the knowledge sharing practice need to further understand the process of workplace learning.

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