

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2016 Conference Proceedings (Charlotte, NC)

Everyday Workplace Learning for Immigrant Justice: Workers' Collaboration in a Nonprofit Organization

Junghwan Kim

University of Oklahoma Norman Campus, jkim@ou.edu

Sunyoung Park

Louisiana State University, spark65@lsu.edu

Jieun You

Ohio State University - Main Campus, you.88@osu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Kim, Junghwan; Park, Sunyoung; and You, Jieun (2016). "Everyday Workplace Learning for Immigrant Justice: Workers' Collaboration in a Nonprofit Organization," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2016/papers/26>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Everyday Workplace Learning for Immigrant Justice: Workers' Collaboration in a Nonprofit Organization

Junghwan Kim
University of Oklahoma
Sunyoung Park
Louisiana State University
Jieun You
Ohio State University

Abstract: The purpose of this case study is to examine learning in the daily workplace of workers (staff members) at a leading community-based Korean-American nonprofit organization (KANPO) in a major city in the US. The study focused on the relationship among workers as a critical dimension for encouraging informal learning in the workplace. Third generation cultural-historical activity theory, including activity system analysis, was used as a theoretical framework. Based on a theory-driven and grounded theoretical approach to data analysis, an activity named “collaboration” and its inner contradictions were identified. While the contradictions have the potential to inhibit workers’ everyday workplace learning, the staff tried to resolve the contradictions and advance the collaboration activity. In this process, learning occurred as the activity’s unintended outcomes at both the social and individual levels. The findings show how everyday workplace learning is socioculturally and historically shaped around the KANPO’s contexts, as well as the way organizations use to create an informal workplace learning environment.

Keywords: everyday/informal workplace learning, non-profit organization, cultural-historical activity theory

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have played a significant role in establishing societal health. Their existence secures the involvement of marginalized groups in society and enhances community development by building capacity with multiple stakeholders (Rubin & Rubin, 2008; Salamon, 2012); however, many NPOs are still in crisis due to several internal and external challenges. Given this context, workplace learning for NPO workers is considered one of the key strategies for overcoming the challenges facing NPOs’ sustainable development and ongoing societal contributions (Mano, 2010; McHargue, 2003).

Workplace learning in NPOs requires a different viewpoint to understand its original and unique characteristics. NPOs are created in response to a community’s social, historical, and cultural needs, rather than to an opportunity to generate profits. This characteristic inevitably involves multiple NPO stakeholders addressing internal and external challenges (Rubin & Rubin, 2008; Salamon, 2012). Thus, workplace learning in NPOs largely depends on multiple informal learning situations through daily work practices, less structured activities beyond formal training (Eraut, 2004; Mano, 2010; Ollis, 2008). Hence, workplace learning at NPOs needs to be grasped as a sociocultural, historical, and collective phenomenon that actively addresses the internal and external environments of NPOs and largely occurs in everyday work practices (Billett & Choy, 2013; Boud & Middleton, 2003).

Not many studies have addressed workplace (informal) learning in the nonprofit sector, despite its importance to the success of those organizations (Billett, 2004; Eraut, 2004, 2007).

Even fewer studies have focused on workplace learning in NPOs by emphasizing systemic/technical viewpoints or workers' learning at the individual level, without thoroughly considering dynamic relationships/interactions in sociocultural contexts (Ellinger, 2005).

To fill the gap in the literature, using cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) as a theoretical framework (Engeström, 1987, 2001), this case study examined the everyday learning of workers (staff members) within a leading community-based Korean-American nonprofit organization (KANPO) by focusing on the relationship among workers as one of the critical dimensions for encouraging informal learning in the workplace (Eraut, 2004).

Theoretical Framework: CHAT

CHAT has a varied lineage. It was developed from a model established by Vygotsky, based on the notion of activity as articulated by Leont'ev, and on the activity network and expansive learning suggested by Engeström (Engeström, 1987, 2001). Currently, as the third generation of CHAT, Engeström's activity system is generally accepted as a useful theoretical representation of CHAT in various academic fields as well as, to a much more limited extent, in the field of adult and workplace learning (Engeström & Sannino, 2010).

CHAT allows researchers to thoroughly examine workplace learning by suggesting the concept of collective activity (activity system) as a minimal unit of analysis comprised of six components (subject, object, mediating artifacts, rule, community, division of labor) within a triangular model and outcomes. The activities are performed by collective humans and are oriented toward objects they select or establish. The object is an entity or purpose within a society or social dimension. It is a motive to lead or guide an activity. The collective activity includes diverse goal-directed actions at the individual or sub-group level and unconscious/conditioned operations at the customized human or machine level. In the third generation of CHAT, the basic model has evolved to include, at a minimum, two interacting activities in an activity network (Engeström, 2001).

The role of "contradiction" in this theory is significant for the higher-level development or expansive transformation/learning of both the individual and group/community. Contradictions refer to "sources of change and development." They "are not the same as problems or conflicts" but "historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). Contradictions can occur at each component (primary) and between the components (secondary) within each activity system, and between/among activities (tertiary and quarterly) in the activity network (Engeström, 1987). The "contradictions become actual driving forces of expansive learning when they are dealt with in such a way that an emerging new object is identified and turned into a motive" (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 7).

CHAT approaches human learning socially, culturally, and historically. It assumes that learning, as it spills over between the individual and society, takes place continuously and dynamically. Learning in CHAT is a possible and procedural outcome based on historicity, and it has the potential to lead to expansive or creative transformation. As learning occurs, CHAT emphasizes the higher developmental levels of learning by negotiating contradictions and in so doing, it creates a new, expanded, or revised object. This expanded object may be manifested in revised patterns of existing activities (or a rearrangement of the activity network's practice); it might consist of sociocultural and structural changes, including new models; or it might be a new type of agency (Engeström, 1987, 2001; Engeström & Sannino, 2010).

Based on CHAT, learning in this study is defined as possible, procedural, and unintended outcomes through a daily activity (or activities). The learning outcomes can be described as (1) a

revised or new object(s), sociocultural and structural change or creation of an activity (activities), and a new activity (or activities) (learning at the social level); and (2) individual learning and new action(s) (learning at the individual level).

Research Design

A case study was selected as the research method (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009) in order to examine the learning practice among workers in a leading KANPO, which is located in a major city that has the second largest KA community. The KANPO is one of the largest community-based organizations in that area and has approximately 16 board members and 18 full-time staff, as well as several interns and volunteers.

To collect data, extensive field notes were created through participatory observations over six months (Emerson et al., 1995) by getting formal permission from the KANPO under the guidance of the Institutional Review Board. Several in-depth, open-ended formal interviews for 17 staff selected as the purposive sample were conducted (Patton, 2002). Multiple documents and several informal interviews with them were also collected to understand their practice.

Across the whole process for data collection and analysis, a triangulation strategy was considered and peer reviews were performed by five professionals in the field of education. Moreover, the formal interviews were transcribed and double-checked by soliciting feedback from each interviewee on the transcriptions (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002, 2009).

The unit of analysis was collective activity proposed by the third generation of CHAT. Data analysis started with a thick description of the daily work life of the staff. Data were analyzed through the process of open, focused, and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006; Emerson et al., 1995), based on the collective activity proposed by CHAT.

Findings

Daily Work of Workers among Peers

The KANPO's official working hours are from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. However, many workers are used to working overtime because of several meetings for community members, meetings of the cultural troupe, organizational events, or unfinished tasks on some days that extend beyond the daily working hours, sometimes even to weekends. Workers arrive at the office around 10:00 a.m. and usually have a short coffee break. It is the only free time they have besides their lunchtime, because their telephone never stops ringing during working hours, and they are never absolutely free from their computers.

Staff members have a meeting that lasts about one-and-a-half hours, beginning at 10:20 a.m., every Monday. In this meeting, workers talk about the personal issues they want to share with others, and they discuss the issues with each program area in the previous week. In addition to the staff meeting, they have a program meeting every week and a joint meeting between the advocacy and organizing and social service staff twice a month. Directors (senior staff) periodically have a meeting that is closed to the other staff, and some of the directors regularly participate in steering committee meetings and quarterly board meetings.

Although the official language used by the KANPO was changed to English by newer generations who were born and/or received most education in the US, workers use both Korean and English for daily work. They are mostly comfortable with this practice, because most of them are bilingual, although they have different language levels. Moreover, the organization follows a practice whereby a worker who has relatively higher language skills provides an interpretation of something for the next person who has lower skills.

Meanwhile, the KANPO has another distinguishing cultural practice. They eat lunch together daily at the conference room by making food in the organization's kitchen. The organization has a rotating system where two persons from among the full-time staff and interns on duty make a lunch on an assigned day. During lunchtime, workers have numerous informal talks with each other, which range from private concerns to work issues. Moreover, if a guest from other organizations that have a partnership with the KANPO is present during lunchtime, the workers encourage the person to eat some Korean food together in the conference room. Sometimes, workers frequently have dinner together or get together after working hours. These diverse informal meetings make the staff form more personal relationships.

Finally, workers have an officially managed "education session" for the staff once a month. Although the session is not always conducted because of heavy workloads, the senior staff always emphasizes staff education as part of the organization's history and culture.

During the research period, the relationship among internal workers for their learning was identified as one of the most significant relational dimensions for informal workplace learning. This is largely because the KANPO had quickly expanded by hiring many new staff members thanks to increased funding. This rapid organizational transformation resulted from the fact that it was facing several emerging tensions and ongoing challenges. One of the key issues the workers were facing was how to work together harmoniously by managing the diversely different personalities and values among them.

Collaboration Activity, Contradictions, and Learning

The findings in this case study are primarily based on the relationship among internal staff members. The staff considered their close relationship to be the fundamental way to advance their work activities. Based on CHAT, an activity (activity system) named "Collaboration" among staff members was identified. The collaboration activity was driven by an object, which was "to comprehensively approach diverse immigrant issues" (see Figure 1). This activity includes not only diverse actions and operations, but it is also driven by the historical accumulation of the organization's background and sociocultural contexts.

As shown in Figure 1, the explosion marks refer to primary contradictions within each component, which can cause secondary contradictions between components. Three secondary contradictions (two-way arrows) recognized by the staff between bold components and one potential contradiction they did not recognize (a dotted two-way arrow) by a bold and italic component (structural power difference in the division of labor) were found within the activity. Various formal and informal meetings prevent them from achieving the object by work burnout and the lack of in-depth social discussion and reflection on immigrant issues, along with limited educational partners and support from stakeholders (i.e., board members and volunteers). Additionally, while the KANPO's newly made organizational systems and structural divisions created by recruiting many new staff contribute to better achieve the activity's object, their new division of labor, with its different statuses, powers, and roles, have led to some tensions/challenges. It has also led to the question of whether or not they are truly working together and are on the same page (a cultural habitus), when they had been driven by their family-like culture based on a strong kinship with each other and organizational traditions.

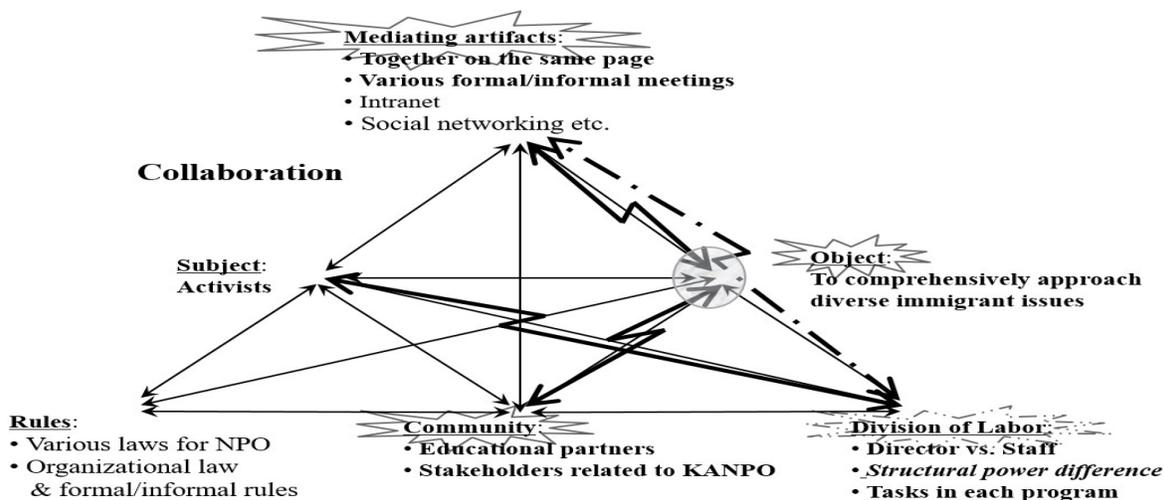


Figure 1. Collaboration activity and inner contradictions

Through several efforts (e.g., intensive and open retreat, planning sessions and free dialogues, meetings) to negotiate the contradictions they recognized, the staff had created new actions to advance the collaboration activity. In this process, learning occurred expansively by creating structural/cultural changes for decision-making, creation of new divisions of labor (e.g., allowance of newer staff in steering committee meeting), and another community for staff education at the social level. At the same time, several actions of individuals or sub-groups and individual learning took place at the individual level. Here, individual learning (e.g., leadership and communication skills, a better understanding of organizational matters and group differences) continuously occurred along with social changes. These unintended learning outcomes recursively influenced the revision of the “collaboration” activity with other intended outcomes (i.e., recurring diverse new staff/experts, a stable organizational structure). Although these were facilitated by an organizational culture that emphasizes equal status, some features to prevent the balancing of power issues between older and newer staff members and among program areas identified by organizational structure may still have the potential to hinder in-depth collaborative learning, as well as advances in activity.

Conclusion

The research findings provide an in-depth understanding of workplace learning in daily practice within an NPO that has not been extensively investigated. In particular, the case of the KANPO shows that informal social reflection and understanding differences (especially generational) among staff members are critical features to facilitating informal learning in the workplace. The study’s findings also show that learning need not be viewed as a binary process of social or individual learning. Rather, this study demonstrates that workplace learning can be understood as a social process in which individual learning is embedded. Finally, the study has significance because it provides a guide to understanding informal workplace learning.

The findings also reveal that the balancing of power issues among workers need to be considered as one primary factor for encouraging their daily workplace learning. Given the context that power is flexible and could be everywhere (Foucault, 1976), building an organizational culture that allows free movement of power among workers regardless of their status or role would contribute to creating a safe and democratic environment for learning that can further advance workers’ social movement activities for immigrant justice.

References

- Billett, S. (2004) Workplace participatory practices: Conceptualising workplaces as learning environments. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 16(6), 312-324.
- Billett, S., & Choy, S. (2013). Learning through work: Emerging perspectives and new challenges. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 25(4), 264-276.
- Boud, D., & Middleton, H. (2003). Learning from others at work: communities of practice and informal learning. *Journal of workplace learning*, 15(5), 194-202.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ellinger, A. D. (2005). Contextual factors influencing informal learning in a workplace setting: The case of “reinventing itself company. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 16(3), 389-415.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.
- Engeström, Y. (1987). *Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research*. Retrieved from <http://lchc.ucsd.edu/mca/Paper/Engestrom/expanding/toc.htm>
- Engeström, Y. (2001). Expansive learning at work: Toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of Education and Work*, 14(1), 133-156.
- Engeström, Y., & Sannino, A. (2010). Studies of expansive learning: Foundations, findings and future challenges. *Educational Research Review*, 5(1), 1-24.
- Eraut, M. (2004). Informal learning in the workplace. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 26(2), 247- 273.
- Eraut, M. (2007). Learning from other people in the workplace. *Oxford Review of Education*, 33(4), 403-422.
- Foucault, M. (1976). *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I. London: Penguin.
- McHargue, S. K. (2003). Learning for performance in nonprofit organizations. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 5(2), 196-204.
- Mano, R. S. (2010). Past organizational change and managerial evaluations of crisis: A case of double-loop learning effects in non-profit organizations. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 22(8), 489-507.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). Assessing and evaluating qualitative research. In S. B. Merriam & Associates (Eds.), *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis* (pp. 18-33). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ollis, T. (2008). The 'accidental activist': Learning, embodiment and action. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 48(2), 316.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2008). *Community organizing and development* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Salamon, L. M. (2012). *America's nonprofit sector: A primer* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: The Foundation Center.