

Ayanda and Bongani's learning through collaboration with peers and through teamwork is also confirmed by collaborative learning proponents who are of the view that collaborative learning is when learners who are at different levels work together in small groups towards a common goal where each one of them has to contribute, learn and become a critical thinker (Wikipedia: May 15, 2009).

The interview with the CEO (July 12, 2007) also confirmed that working together was a norm in his organisation. "I established a friendship with those individuals (the subjects). We are close to each other and we all know that they are never going to withdraw." He further stated: "We are a team here, no one thinks of the other as being older, we work together as a team."

4.2.3 Learning in both formal and informal settings

It has already been emphasised in this paper that both Ayanda and Bongani joined this organisation with limited knowledge and skills related to administrative matters having just finished their schooling. In terms of their familiarity with computer operating systems and programmes, they knew even less. However, since the work tasks are dependent on specific computer literacy skills, the organisation afforded them opportunities to learn these skills at work.

As already discussed, Bongani's computer literacy learning was the result of his supervisor's direct 'on the job' teaching. He, however mentions that subjects like Accountancy, Economics and Business Economics that he did at school, helped him in performing tasks like petty cash reconciliations, writing cheques and writing invoices (Bongani, interview: July 12, 2007). Both Ayanda and Bongani's computer learning processes were as a result of informal learning at their workplace but they only learnt because they actively participated in the goal-directed activities that were structured by their workplace experiences (Fenwick: 2001).

Both Bongani's and Ayanda's immediate supervisors left the organisation. Ayanda suspected that this would happen because she was being introduced to working closely with the CEO a year before her supervisor left. Bongani on the other hand was unaware that his supervisor would leave so soon. Accordingly, when his supervisor left the organisation, Bongani was "thrown in at the deep end". Bongani was never inducted into the budgeting and auditing processes before his supervisor left the organisation. He also noticed that budgeting was the most important component of his work as a new Financial Controller (Bongani, interview: July 12, 2007).

When Bongani called his former supervisor for assistance, the latter was unhelpful, simply stating that Bongani had to "learn the hard way". Due to this challenge, Bongani had to devise ways of learning independently in order to acquire the skills and knowledge related to budgeting and auditing. Bongani recalled: "I had to sit up at night. I took the thick files that [my previous supervisor] used to compile [to my] home, every night. This was in March and there was a Financial Report to be finished in June and the final one in September, no, the first one was in April. The April one was the one that I was more worried about" (Bongani, interview: July 12, 2007). Through examining the layout of the reports, Bongani was able to model his own report. The process of taking the files home and examining the style and format, helped him to understand what a financial report needs to convey. His systematic studying of previous reports and having to draw up his own report, ensured that Bongani was able to answer questions that funders put to him a month after his supervisor left. This suggests that personal initiative and the pressure to complete an authentic task facilitated Bongani's learning.

However, Bongani mentions that there was another challenge of auditing for him. "External auditing is very expensive and it is therefore better when an organisation has good internal auditing procedures to minimise the expenses". He therefore needed auditing skills to minimise the costs of external auditing. Unfortunately, there was no one in the organisation who could teach him these skills. He then approached the CEO of the organisation and discussed this problem with him. Following the advice of the CEO, Bongani enrolled for an auditing course at a Technikon as part of a formal qualification.

This course, according to Bongani, “helped him a great deal when he had to do internal auditing of the company” (Bongani, interview: July 12, 2007).

The Australian National Training Authority -ANTA (2002) views workplace learning as incorporating on-the-job training for employees but this can be coupled with attendance at some formal courses at one’s workplace. This is exactly what happened in Bongani’s case.

4.2.4 Learning through seeking advice from mentors and peers

The culture within the organisation made it easy for Bongani and Ayanda to approach colleagues for guidance, advice and help related to work matters. When the subjects joined the organisation, it was made clear to them that whenever they needed help with any of their tasks, they should feel free to ask their supervisors for help. Their peers also voluntarily offered help when Ayanda and Bongani needed assistance. They worked together and shared ideas freely with their peers in the office. This culture of working together irrespective of positions occupied by employees, made the situation more relaxed for the subjects right from the beginning. Both subjects were able to form friendships with their peers and when they sought advice in order to perform their tasks, it became easier and comfortable.

When Ayanda and Bongani were practising what they were taught, for example, computer operations, it was easy to request either their supervisors’ or any other colleagues help when and if they encountered a problem. Their supervisors were certainly their mentors because they had direct experience of the skills needed by the new employees (i.e. Ayanda and Bongani). They also received direct coaching from the CEO on various aspects of their work. This is evident in all the interviews where both subjects were found by the researcher to be extremely loyal to the CEO as a result of his constant and consistent guidance. Even though the CEO may not necessarily be an expert in the field of administration, he gave advice, praises and encourage. He transferred his communication skills to the subjects to ensure that Bongani and Ayanda improve all the

time. The coaching provided by the CEO is consistent with the advice provided by the Coaching and Mentoring Network (accessed on the 18th October, 2008) who suggest that coaching is a process enabling learning and development to take place. This automatically results in improvement of performance. Somers (2002) explains that coaching is not aimed at passing on knowledge. Rather, coaching encourages and assists those who are coached to make sense for themselves. Sharing the same sentiment is Dumi Magadlela (accessed on the 18th October, 2009) who sees coaching as a method of learning that seeks to develop an individual and raise self-awareness trying to ensure that they achieve their goals and perform more effectively.

The interview with the CEO provides evidence of the ongoing coaching in this organisation, particularly provided by the CEO. The CEO (July 12, 2007) mentioned that there is no ceiling in their work situations and therefore one cannot talk about reaching full potential because the organisation gets different projects and everyone has to constantly learn something new. This therefore suggests that as long as the subjects are at this NGO, and as long as this organisation gets new projects, the employees will continually learn and grow. At the same time, they will need a coach to encourage them. If this organisation is constantly obtaining new projects, different strategies will have to be applied all the time. As a result, life-long learning, which is described by Hager (2004) and Jarvis (2004) as not only being confined to a certain period or to a certain institutional setting, is real in this organisation. Human beings need to grow and learn all the time as their environments are constantly changing.

When Ayanda was asked whether she and Bongani learn from one another she replied: “Oh yes, Bongani and I spend a bit of time in this office. We discuss projects and I give my input as well, and I listen to his views” (Ayanda, interview: July 12, 2007). This shows that the subjects seek advice and exchange ideas from one another, thus they are not solely dependent on advice and guidance from their coaches and mentors. Seeking advice from peers that result in learning is part of the organisational culture. Bongani reports that he frequently sought advice from peers such as ‘Terry’ (email correspondence: July 2007).

4.2.5 Learning through imitating role Models

The study has concluded that the subjects also learnt through modeling. When the subjects joined the organisation, they were both made to work very closely with their supervisors who were experts in their jobs and these supervisors became the subjects' models. Ormond (1999) says that people are reinforced by their models. They want to be like them especially if the models are valued by the people around them. Ayanda's supervisor was Head of Administration, while Bongani's was Head of Finance. They were therefore highly valued in this organisation.

Ayanda and Bongani were both enthusiastic when they were employed in their respective positions and wanted to succeed. Their immediate supervisors were the only role models they had in order to understand how their tasks needed to be executed.

Following Ormond (1999), it can be argued that Ayanda and Bongani's learning was reinforced by their models. Dr George Boeree (1999) states that role modeling requires that the observers (learners) pay attention, retain and remember what they paid attention to, in order to be able to reproduce what they observed in the role model. They also need to be motivated i.e. doing what you do because there is a reason for the action. This research found that this is exactly what happened in the case of Ayanda and Bongani.

With regard to Ayanda, she had no difficulty when asked by her supervisor to phone the embassies. She had heard her supervisor talking to embassy staff as they shared an office: "I had heard how she spoke to those embassies many times and I just did the same. It was not like we were isolated in our small offices like before when I just started". This confirms Ormond's (1999) view that in learning through modeling an observer might be reinforced by a person who is an outstanding leader. In observing how Ayanda's supervisor spoke to embassy staff, Ayanda "paid attention to, retained and reproduced" when she was asked to call embassies. The motivation behind Ayanda's action was that she wanted to do the job to the best of her abilities.

4.2.5 Learning through Trial and Error

Both subjects talked about how they would be shown how to get into a computer and work in a certain programme e.g. MSDOS for the female subject and EXCEL for the male subject. They would later be given tasks to do on their own. Independent working is confirmed by Kolb (1984) who views learning as taking place when there has been reflective thought and internal processing of experience. He says that experience has to make sense to the learner. When the subjects performed their tasks independently, it was a process of ensuring that reflective thoughts and internal processing had taken place. As a result, they could then make sense of the experience by applying the knowledge they acquired. At the same time, they were given space to make mistakes while working on their own. They could learn from their mistakes because they both report that they were free to seek assistance at any time.

When Bongani's supervisor left the organisation he realised that budgeting and auditing were important tasks. Accordingly, he took home old files that his former supervisor had worked on in order to work out, on his own, how to do budgeting, learning through trial and error.

Bongani also reported that before he joined the organisation he was unable to speak in front of a crowd but in this organisation he was compelled to speak to funders, government departments and other prospective clients. His public speaking communication skills were learnt through trial and error as well. When he was required to present and speak in front of a class whilst he was pursuing his formal qualification, it was "not much effort". He integrated the new information that he was acquiring at the learning institution with what he had learnt from the organisation.

4.3 Conclusion

This study found that the subjects in this study learnt through:

- Direct teachings and support from colleagues at their workplace;
- Learning collaboratively with their peers whilst working as team members;
- Participating in formal and informal educational programmes;
- Seeking advice from mentors and peers;
- Modelling their tasks on a role model;
- Trial and error.

The final section concludes the study.



SECTION 5

CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS

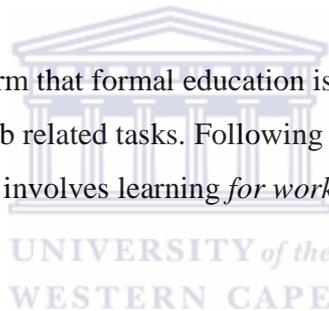
5.1 Introduction

This section summarises the findings on how Ayanda and Bongani became ‘experts’ in their respective jobs.

5.2 Conclusion of the Study

The aim of the study was to explore the learning journey travelled by the two administrators from an educational NGO as they moved from being novices to ultimately being regarded as experts within their field of practice. The study further contests the notion that legitimate and valuable knowledge and skills can only be formally acquired.

The findings of the study confirm that formal education is only one of the ways in which people learn to perform their job related tasks. Following from this study, it can be argued that workplace learning involves *learning for work*; *learning at work* and *learning through work*.



In the case of the two subjects of this research, schooling was the only learning that can be classified as *learning for work*. However, as this study has shown, schooling was insufficient preparation for the administrative tasks the subjects were required to fulfill.

Most of the learning that equipped the subjects to perform efficiently in their jobs, happened *at work*. Learning at work was only made possible through the learning affordances that became available to the subjects but also through their willingness to take the learning opportunities made available at work.

The culture of the organisation encouraged collaborative learning. Employees performed specific tasks but they were also encouraged to assist one another in their work roles. Collaborative learning took the form of ‘knowledge-transfer’ where the supervisors acted as the teachers and the research subjects as students. Collaborative learning was also

evident in 'negotiating meaning'. This form of collaboration happened when both the supervisor as well as the subject did not know how to proceed or understand an issue. In these instances both the supervisor and the subjects learn as they find a solution to the problem.

Coaching and mentoring was another strategy that afforded learning for the subjects. However, coaching was not about giving the 'right answers', rather it was characterised by advice and guidance.

Trial and error was another strategy that resulted in learning. This study found that the subjects, when they were unsure of how to proceed with a problem, attempted to test possible solutions and allowed themselves to make mistakes.

The subjects also learnt through modeling. Their supervisors became their role models.

The research subjects in this study learnt *through work* when it became clear that the organisation did not have the knowledge and or experience to solve a problem. Learning through work happened when Bongani was advised to register for a formal auditing qualification.

The context that facilitated and afforded learning within the institution was the healthy environment/culture that existed within the institution. The institution made equipment (e.g. computers) available, encouraged the staff to share and teach as well as entrust novices with responsible tasks.

5.3 Further Research Possibilities

The analysis and findings of this research have shown beyond doubt that even though formal education has made a contribution in the learning journeys of the subjects; learning at work and learning through work have had a greater influence on their learning journeys.

In order to extend and generalise the findings of this case study, it is proposed that a similar study be conducted in two or more fields to investigate how employees learn *at work* and compare such finding with the findings in this study.



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