

**A CASE STUDY OF TWO ADMINISTRATORS FROM AN
NGO WHO DEVELOPED FROM NOVICES TO EXPERTS**

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the learning journey that was traveled by the two administrators who joined a non-governmental organisation as novices over ten years ago almost fresh from school and are now regarded as experts in their respective positions. The research attempts to describe the nature of their learning and analyse how they became the knowledgeable in their respective posts.

The research is a qualitative study that analyses data obtained through interviewing the key subjects (the administrators) and the chief executive officer (CEO) of the organisation as well as the self narrative as compiled by the administrators.

This research questions formalised learning as the only form of acquiring knowledge and accordingly adopted workplace learning as a theoretical framework for the study. Workplace learning stresses that knowledge is not limited to formalised settings such as schools, colleges and universities. Rather, knowledge is also constructed in informal and non-formal settings such as work-places and in families.

The study found that the administrators drew on many learning strategies to acquire their knowledge and skills related to administration which includes learning through:

- The teachings and support of their supervisors and peers;
- Collaboration with peers and working as a team;
- Seeking advice from their mentors, coaches and peers;
- Modeling
- Workplace affordances.

The study concluded that indeed formalised learning has not been the only form of acquiring knowledge for the subjects but workplace learning has played a vital role in their career development.

C. DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my mother, my late father and grandparents who under difficult circumstances ensured that I attended school. My late father was not satisfied that I obtained only a junior degree as he had great faith in my capabilities. My mother taught me that one should never give up in life.



DECLARATION

I declare that this research paper is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examinations to any other university.

Theresa Querida Soci

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CONTENT	PAGE
Section 1	
Introduction to the study	
1.1 Introduction of the Introductory section of the study	9
1.2 Overview	9
1.3 Purpose of the study	10
1.4 Background to the study	11
1.5 Conclusion	14
Section 2	
Literature Review	
2.1 Introduction	16
2.2 Learning Perspectives: Situated Learning	16
2.3 Workplace Learning	22
2.4 Conclusion	26
Section 3	
Methodology	
3.1 Introduction	27
3.2 Type of Research	27
3.3 Data Collection and Data Completion	29
3.4 Research Process	30
3.5 Conclusion	32
Section 4	
Findings and Analysis	
4.1 Introduction	33
4.2 How the subjects learnt	34
4.3 Conclusion	47
Section 5	
Conclusion	
Introduction	48
Conclusion of the Study	48
Further Research Possibilities	49
Bibliography and References	51



SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction of the Introductory section of the study

This introductory section presents the principle issue of the research. It provides information regarding the initial competence levels and capabilities of the two administrators who are the key subjects of this study. To contextualise the study, background information regarding the institution at which these two subjects are employed, is provided. This section further describes the problems to be investigated more fully. In addition, the introductory section also provides the aims and purpose of this investigation.



1.2 Overview

Modern societies rate formalised learning so highly that they assume that formalised knowledge gained through formal learning processes is the only legitimate form of knowledge (Barnett 1994). This perspective is obviously contested. Fenwick (2001:4), for example, stresses that experiential learning throughout the 20th century was intended to challenge the perspective that learning acquired within formal institutions is the only legitimate form of knowledge. Proponents of experiential learning (Fenwick 2001; Harris 2000; Michelson 1997; Simosko 1997; Wenger, 1998) argue that non-formal learning and/or informal learning is as valuable and legitimate as formally acquired learning.

The two administrators, the principal subjects of this study, serve to illustrate that legitimate and valuable knowledge and skills are not only formally acquired. The subjects joined their institution of employment with only a matriculation certificate and minimal working experience. In fact, they were regarded as novice administrators when they

started work and today they are regarded as expert administrators by their peers and by their superiors (Interview with CEO, June 2007; researcher's personal observation¹).

The researcher finds it useful to define an expert in this study. The *Compact Oxford Dictionary* (2002) defines an expert as a very knowledgeable or skilful individual in a particular area, while the *Collins English Dictionary* (1972) defines an expert as someone who knows his subject and trade thoroughly. Following from the above definitions, in this study an 'expert' is defined as a person skilful in the technical aspects of her/his work; is knowledgeable about the organisational and social contexts within which the organisation operates; and has an awareness of and shares the institutional values.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The research explores the learning journey travelled by the two administrators from an educational non-governmental organisation (NGO) as they moved from being novices to ultimately being regarded as experts within their field of practice. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to describe and analyse the learning that has taken place as a result of working within an educational NGO that resulted in the professional growth of two the administrators.

Drawing on the learning journeys of the administrators, the key question that guides this study is: *How can workplace learning be theorised within the context of the specific work site that forms this case study?*

1.4 Background to the study

The subjects are working for an educational NGO which was founded more than thirty years ago. Its initial objective was to promote equity in school-based education in South Africa through learner-centred programmes especially for those who are currently

¹ Researcher is a former employee of the institution. She was employed by the institution from 1996 to 1999. The researcher rejoined the institution as an employee in 2006. She still works for the organisation on contractual basis.

classified as previously disadvantaged communities. At present, it specialises in the development and implementation of community-based educational interventions. Since 1994 its initial focus changed and the NGO is now engaged in national civic educational campaigns such as voter education, census awareness, financial literacy, women's and children's rights, health issues, life-skills, moral regeneration, etc. (CEO, interview January 30, 2007).

1.4.1 The Female Subject

Ayanda² joined the organisation in February 1995, as an administrator, almost fresh from school. At that point it would have been fair to classify her as a novice administrator since her skills and knowledge regarding administrative procedures and practices were limited. Since then, Ayanda has progressed as an administrator from initially being employed as a junior clerk to eventually becoming the Personal Assistant (PA) of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) as well as being Head of Administration.

Under the supervision of a senior colleague, Ayanda's entry level tasks included typing on a computer, invoicing and managing the telephone (e.mail correspondence, Feb 13, 2007).

Progressively, she was expected to perform roles such as formulating, writing and sending out funding proposals to possible funders and making 'strategic' phone calls to clients [phone calls that encouraged funders to want to continue funding the organisation] (Ayanda, interview: July 12, 2007). According to the CEO, these tasks were fulfilled independently and through her own initiative.

When Ayanda started at the institution she worked closely with a more experienced administrator who was her supervisor and who acted as her coach and mentor within the institution. From 1999, under the supervision of her administrative mentor, she was

² Pseudonyms are used in the study for ethical reasons which include protecting the identities of respondents.

gradually introduced to more responsible tasks that included assisting with tasks within the CEO's office.

In 2000, the CEO's personal assistant left the institution and Ayanda was requested to take on her roles and responsibilities within the institution. These responsibilities included compiling letters for the CEO; screening calls to the CEO, liaising with government departments, responding to queries emanating from the High Commissions, embassies and businesses in order to maintain good relations with sponsors and funders. She was also required to manage the personal diary of the CEO (Ayanda, Interview: July 12, 2007).

The above narrative suggests that Ayanda developed within the institution from initially being unfamiliar with administrative tasks and roles to eventually being capable of handling administrative matters at the highest level required within the institution. She executed her tasks and responsibilities with confidence.

This study will show that Ayanda did not attend any formal educational programme to enhance her administrative skills whilst being employed at the NGO. So how has she learnt? It may be assumed that the knowledge and skills Ayanda utilised in the execution of her work tasks have all been acquired experientially. This study will elaborate further on the process of Ayanda's learning journey in Section 4.

1.4.2 The Male Subject

Bongani is the second administrator and subject in this study. Bongani is a male who started at the institution without a well-defined job description. It was expected of him to help in different sections of the institution whenever a section needed additional capacity (Bongani, e-mail correspondence: Feb 06, 2007). From initially being 'the Jack of all trades', Bongani progressed to currently being the Head of Finance within the institution.

Like Ayanda, Bongani joined the organisation in August 1997 as a novice in an administrative position when he was 19 years old, having completed his schooling. Even though Bongani registered as a student at the local university he was forced, due to personal reasons, to cease his studies in the same year. As mentioned earlier, Bongani's initial employment within the institution was not well defined in that his job description required that he assist, administratively, in various sections of the institution. However, his primary responsibility required that he assist the Financial Controller with filing, bank deposits/withdrawals and generally fulfill tasks requested of him while under the supervision of the Financial Controller. These tasks included delivering and collecting documents related to financial matters of the organisation (Bongani, e-mail correspondence: Feb 06, 2007).

Within a month of his arrival at the organisation, Bongani's duties expanded to include managing the petty cash and doing the reconciliations associated with these. Furthermore, he also became responsible for managing wages and salaries of the dispatch section employees. These tasks were done under the guidance and supervision of the Financial Controller.

In the initial few months of his employment at the institution, Bongani was also asked to assist in managing the logistics of a project involving the nationwide distribution of readers to schools. The job involved setting up contacts at schools for deliveries, capturing their details and ensuring that the materials reach specific destinations at the

appropriate time for others to use within the project. These tasks were carried out under the supervision of experienced employees (Bongani, interview: July 12, 2007).

Early in 2003 the Financial Controller, Bongani's supervisor, left the institution. Bongani was automatically expected to fulfill the vacant position on the assumption that as he had worked with the Financial Controller, he must have learnt how the office of the Financial Controller functioned.

The duties of Bongani's new position included financial reporting which he had never done before. Bongani was also expected to compile various budgets for different projects within the institution. The Financial Controller had left hand-written explanatory notes of what needed to be done. The notes were not very clear and Bongani was unfamiliar with the tasks associated with his new position. (Bongani, interview: July 12, 2007).

In preparation for the new position and to ensure that he was not regarded as a failure, Bongani took home some of the old files related to budgeting and financial control, compiled by his predecessor, in order to study them and to gain an understanding of what needed to be done (Bongani, interview: July 12, 2007; e-mail correspondence: Feb 06, 2007).

In an interview with the CEO, it became evident that he was of the opinion that the institution would not be able to function without Ayanda and Bongani heading the institution's administration. He categorically stated that "they are not allowed to leave the organisation" (CEO, interview: July 12, 2007).

1.5 Conclusion

The introductory section of this paper has presented an overview of the research and has summarised how the subjects of the study, who joined as novices, are today seen as pillars of the said institution to the extent that leaving the organisation is not an option for

them. Only experts or very skilful and knowledgeable employees are so highly valued by their CEO.

This paper is divided into five sections. This introductory section is followed by the literature review which is intended to sharpen and deepen the theoretical framework of the research. Section Three discusses the methodology used in gathering data for the study; Section Four presents the findings and an analysis of the findings; Section Five concludes the study and identifies possibilities for further research that emanate from this study.



SECTION 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This section reviews the relevant literature in exploring and understanding the learning journeys travelled by two administrators as they developed within their place of work from novices to being regarded as experts by their peers and associates.

The literature review first focuses on learning perspectives in order to theorise and explore how human beings generally learn. The review of the literature related to perspectives on learning is intended to sharpen and deepen the theoretical framework of this research. Constructivism and socio-cultural learning perspectives are the two main learning perspectives that the researcher has found useful for this research paper.

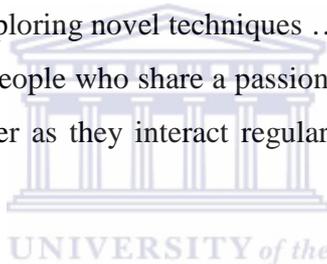
Second, this section reviews and explores literature related to workplace learning and its relation to unplanned learning, informal learning, non-formal learning, experiential and lifelong learning.

2.2 Learning Perspectives: Situated Learning

Wenger (1998) postulates, drawing on socio-cultural perspective of learning, that learning occurs through social participation. Participation refers to a process of being actively engaged in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities (Wenger, 1998: 4; 263). Accordingly, from this perspective, learning involves participating actively in the cultural and social practices of a community - a “community of practice”. This suggests that since knowledge and skills are products of learning, social participation through sharing of ideas, performance and social collaboration are essential in knowledge construction/acquisition.

Lave and Wenger (1991) further explain that contextual knowledge (situated knowledge) within a community of practice is constructed to an initial process of apprenticeship supported by other approaches such as coaching and collaboration including modelling, articulation of learning skills, stories and technology. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's theory of situated knowledge is based on the assumption that 'communities of practice' are organically formed and are to be found everywhere – the work place, schools and social spaces, amongst others. According to Wenger:

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artist seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques In a nutshell: Communities of practice are groups of people who share a passion for something they do and they learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. (Wenger, c 2007, quoted in Smith 2003, 2009).



This study draws on the insights related to situated learning as discussed above. The subjects in this study entered the institution initially as apprentices and as they learnt they became full members of their 'community of practice' – the educational NGO.

2.2.1 Constructivism

The fundamental idea that underpins constructivism is that the meaning making process is constructed by participants involved in the learning process. Green and Gredler (2002: 54) identify four strands or categories of constructivism which they classify into the learning perspective of Piaget; the learning perspective of Vygotsky; social constructivism; and holistic constructivism. According to Green and Gredler (2002: 56) the Piagetian perspective involves cognitive processes that result from the learner manipulating objects that “gradually lead to the capability of constructing and testing hypotheses in multifactor situation”; The Vygotskian perspective, whilst also being

cognitive in nature, focuses on “complex skills as the goal of cognitive development”. These higher order cognitive skills are “categorical perception”, “conceptual thinking”, “logical memory” and “voluntary attention”; Social constructivism is based on the assumption that learners/legitimate participants are immersed within a “community of expert practitioners with gradual movement from periphery tasks to full participation” (2002: 57). Closely related to social constructivism, holistic constructivism is based on the assumption that learning is enhanced when the learning process starts “an understanding of the whole rather than its parts” (2002: 58).

The theoretical approach of this study biases the social constructivism and the Vygotskian learning perspectives.

For constructivists, learning is not a process that involves the transmission of knowledge from the ‘knower’ to the head of a passively receiving learner. On the contrary, the learner is actively constructing new knowledge drawing on past and present knowledge and experiences during that construction. This view is supported by Bruner (1967) who states that while people are learning through collaboration with others, they are also negotiating meaning with them.

Constructivism also acknowledges that those who are involved in a new learning situation are not empty vessels. Through social interaction, individuals share their knowledge and/or experience with others. Individuals might have derived their prior knowledge or experience from formal, informal or non-formal situations or from the combination of these situations. Bruner (1986), recognising that knowledge construction involves a process of negotiating meaning argues that it should not be assumed that learners interact as empty slates. Rather, learners interact with others based on what they already know and might have experienced. Prior knowledge and experience thus play a vital role in learning. As Bruner (1967) maintains, knowledge construction accordingly builds upon current and previous knowledge and experiences brought to new contexts or environments.

Constructivists emphasise that the construction process is not an individual process but a process involving interaction with other people. From this, it can be argued that learning is a social process and involves teams or communities constructing knowledge collaboratively.

Collaborative learning can be traced to Paulo Freire (1990) who views learning as being socially constructed. The question of collaboration during learning is further confirmed by Haller et al (2000), who are also advocates of constructivism. Their perspective is that learning is an active process wherein a learner constructs his/her knowledge through collaborating with others. Supporting this argument Bruner (1986: 32) suggests that the world people live in is a symbolic world which is constituted by social rules and values and accordingly, it is impossible for a human being to “master that world without the aid and assistance of others, in fact, the world is others”.

Constructivists like Bauersfeld (1988) believe that instructors of learning must be facilitators rather than teachers where their roles are only to help learners acquire their own understanding of content by providing guidelines. This helps the learner to come to his/her own conclusions, thus encouraging the learner to become an effective thinker. Von Glasersfeld (1989) further argues that learning is dependent on a learner. He states that a learner’s motivation to learn depends on his/her confidence and potential for learning.

The analysis of data generated in this study examines whether and how Ayanda and Bongani have interacted with other people (e.g. colleagues) at work (in their environment) during their construction process (doing what they were expected to do).

Some constructivists suggest that repetition is the tool that leads to mastery of construction (skill) when learning. When doing or constructing something and getting it right the first time, one must do it again and again in order to master it. According to Von Glaserfeld (1989), once individuals are able to construct, it means that they have done their tasks over and over again. Through doing and redoing they will be able to do their

work without supervision. Von Glaserfeld (1989) believes that learning has not occurred if a learner cannot construct. If one has been through a process of constructing, (i.e. the actual process) being able to construct, means that one has to do it again and again (recurrence). After recurrence, one knows and will then easily remember, through constructing and reconstructing.

From the above literature one can conclude that the following are tenets of constructivism:

- Individuals learn by doing;
- Learning is a result of shared ideas;
- Mastering learning is a result of doing and redoing;
- Learning takes place where participants' voices are heard and negotiation is key;
- Learning takes place when individuals are allowed to create opportunities for the construction of new ideas;
- Learning becomes more meaningful when participants reflect on experiences with others involved in the same or related experiences, recognising that all individuals involved in learning have prior knowledge and/or experiences.

2.2.2 Socio-cultural perspective

The socio-cultural perspective has some tenets that are similar to constructivism. This perspective focuses primarily on learning as a social interaction. It sees learning as an important part of our everyday lives.

Wenger (1998) supports the legitimacy of informal learning and argues that individuals learn through social participation within 'communities of practice'. He defines communities of practice as being families, friends and colleagues at work, social gatherings etc., which are everywhere in formal, informal as well as non-formal situations. According to Wenger, whenever one is in a community of practice, one learns.

Wenger (1998) explains that all individuals belong to “communities of practice” and sometimes do leave communities to join others. According to Wenger (1998:72) not every community is a ‘community of practice’ but community becomes a ‘community of practice’ when there is a mutual engagement on tasks and members of the community negotiate meaning where members’ duties are defined. Defining members’ duties encourages participation and interaction so that knowledge can be shared. Wenger (1998: 76) maintains that it is not only members in higher positions who are ‘active’ in “communities of practice” but mutual engagement from everyone ensures the health of the community. The members are therefore expected to be able to receive from, as well as give, to others and thus shared learning becomes important in communities of practice.

Similar to constructivism, the socio-cultural theory supports that learning takes place only when those involved in a community of practice are active participants. Reflection is an integral part of this active participation by members of a community of practice. Also important to this model is that members of a community of practice must have an identity within the group in order to have good interactions with each other. Wenger states, for instance, (1998:4) that participation in the communities of practice means “encompassing a process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities”. However, members do argue with each other and talk behind each others’ backs but they also joke with each other. Most importantly, they should try to make sense of whatever they are working on together through negotiations in order to reach consensus once meaning has been established.

Consistent with Wenger (1998), but from a different perspective, Michelson (1997) argues that socially useful knowledge is the product of active engagement with the real world. She therefore suggests that through unplanned learning, workers do create useful knowledge that ought to be recognised. For Michelson, the only reason that informal learning remains unrecognised within the formal system is because of the misappropriation of power by the elite within education institutions. She accordingly

makes an appeal for formal recognition of informally and non-formally recognised acquired knowledge by arguing that:

Knowledge is gained in concrete human activity, not in socially isolated contemplation. Moreover it [recognition of prior learning (RPL)] challenges the monopoly of knowledge that is the hallmark of the traditional academy RPL makes a claim that historically devalued lives – those of workers, of women, of non-Europeans – are locations from which knowledge can be created, thus positing experience of non-elite as an alternative authority (Michelson, 1997: 143)

As in constructivism, the socio-cultural perspective sees learning as a social interaction where experience and sharing of experience play a crucial role.

2.3 Workplace Learning



2.3.1 Emergence of Workplace Learning

According to the Australian National Training Authority – ANTA (2002), workplace learning is as old as when people started working. This is supported by Guile and Young (1998) who cite Casey (1995:74) stating that “work is an educational site in which pedagogical and learning practices have always taken place”. It, however, never gained the credit it deserved. Just like constructivism and socio-cultural perspective, participant learning forms an integral part of workplace learning.

ANTA (2002) views workplace learning as incorporating on-the-job training for employees as well as being sent to attend some courses by one’s workplace.

Guile and Young (1998) argue that workplace learning is often referred to as being “informal”. They regard the term “informal” as negative and unfair because the activities workers are involved in within the workplace are not ‘informal’. Workers learn from one another and through this process production is increased.

Agreeing with Guile and Young (1998), Fenwick (2001) complains that experiential learning is sometimes referred to as incidental or informal learning and is often not given the credit it deserves. Fenwick stresses that this negativity is because most people view formal learning as being a situation where there are formal teachers and didactic practices and this is often not the case at workplaces. However, she states that the negativity towards informal learning is contradicted by evidence that most learning happens outside educational institutions where there are no formal teachers and didactic practices. Furthermore, learning at the workplace results from participating, thinking and acting where there are goal-directed activities that are structured by workplace experiences which happen within workplaces.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991) workplace tasks and activities determine the goals and practices at work. The employees embark in activities and tasks such as interacting with each other and through their participation in these processes, they learn from one another. When a new employee or an apprentice joins a workplace, they might start off at the margins of the 'community of practice' but as they become more accepted as a result of becoming 'full' members of the community, they move to the core of the community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Lave (1988) further states that new employees or apprentices are helped to extend beyond their current capabilities and performances and at that point they have gained new knowledge. The development of apprentices or new employees from inexperienced or less experienced is becoming prominent at this point. What is also clear is that new employees develop capabilities within their communities of practice at their workplaces, not as isolated individuals, but through their co-operation with others.

The same notion preached by Lave and Wenger (1991) is concurred by Fenwick (2001) who states that much of adult learning is believed to be through every day tasks and daily interactions. Learning happens at home, within communities and at other non-formal educational sites. As already mentioned under socio-cultural perspective, Michelson (1997) argues that socially useful knowledge is the product of active engagement with the real world. She further states that on a daily basis at workplaces, through unplanned

learning, workers create and gain useful knowledge that ought to be recognised by formal situations.

From the above, it is clear that as long as individuals work, they automatically learn from their tasks and activities which are at times new experiences. They learn from others who have done the same tasks and activities before. They also develop further through finding out new things which, are at times, not their own tasks through further exploration. Workplaces ensure that goals are reached through employees' interactions with each other and through performing and finding out from others when tasks are not familiar. This process does not only secure jobs and open career pathways for employees but also pushes up the productivity of the workplace. In this case, both employer (produce increases) and employees (knowledge, skills and self-fulfillment) benefit.

2.3.3 Workplace learning as Life-long Learning

The validity and legitimacy of informal and non-formal learning is also advocated by the proponents of life-long learning. Life-long learning as a concept signals that learning is neither limited to particular period in one's life nor confined to any particular institutional setting, i.e. learning is life-wide and incorporates formal, informal and non-formal learning as equally valid modes of learning. This is confirmation that workplace learning is life-long learning because workers/ employees are forever working, learning from each other and sharing experiences at their workplaces. There is also a view that since the educational system, which facilitates institutionalised and formalised learning, is recognised as the site of learning, life-long learning as a system, attempts to formalise all modes of learning through public recognition and accreditation (Jarvis, 2004: 65).

The life-long proponents argue that 'life-long learning' and a 'learning society' are unchallengeable in the sense that the absence of learning implies dying - to be human and alive necessitates continuous growth and learning. The dependent relationship of living and learning is subscribed by most cultures and are reflected in assertions such as 'seek knowledge from the cradle to grave' or learn womb to tomb'. Theoretically, life-long

learning is necessary for the simple reason that human beings have a constant need to live in harmony with their environments and since this environment (social, physical and emotional) is continuously changing, they need to learn continuously. Therefore, there is a need for learning that “instills the life-long learning capacity to grow and readjust constantly to [this continuing] changing environment” (Hager, 2004:11). Peter Jarvis concurs and concludes that human beings have a basic need to learn just as they have the need for nutrition and shelter (2004:35-37).

Similarly, Marsick and Watkins (1992) stress that, formalized learning is not the only legitimate way of acquiring knowledge and skills. They perceive experiential learning as a challenge to the perception that worthwhile or legitimate learning is only planned and properly accredited and that learning only occurs in formal programmes, institutions and in classrooms.

They are supported by Billet (2001) who argues that, “workplaces are becoming even more salient as the responsibility for maintaining the currency of vocational practice as being increasingly transferred to workers in the current reformulation of lifelong learning policies and practices.”

The importance of informal learning seems to be difficult to ignore. According to Schuetze and Sweet (2003) a general consensus is emerging that informal learning and/or workplace learning play important roles in addressing the gap in formal learning which is unable to provide all the necessary skills for work in the new economy. It remains to be seen whether there were such gaps in the case of the two subjects of this research, Ayanda and Bongani, who were recent products of formal learning before joining a non-governmental organisation.

2.4 Conclusion

This section presented a review of literature which is relevant for the analysis of the research data. The literature reviewed suggests that learning is not limited to attending formal educational institutions. On the contrary, learning happens in various social contexts formal, informal and non-formal. Furthermore, workplaces are environments wherein employees interact with peers thereby facilitating learning opportunities. These affordances (learning opportunities) are the result of social interactions and active participation in work related activities.

The next section presents the methodology adopted by the research. It discusses the choice of the research subjects, data collection techniques and the research process.



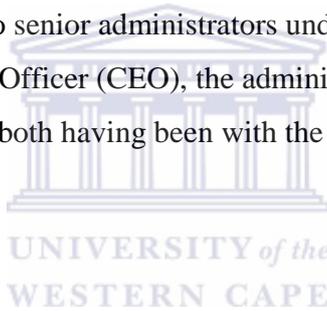
SECTION 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This section presents the methodology and design adopted in this study. The aim of this section is to describe the data collection process and to justify the research methods selected to gather the data. Furthermore, the section explains how the data is analysed.

As mentioned in the earlier sections, the research site for this research is an educational non-governmental organisation (NGO). The unit of analysis for this study is the nature and process of learning that two senior administrators underwent from novices to experts. Excluding the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the administrators are the longest-serving employees of the organisation, both having been with the organisation for more than 10 years.



3.2 Type of Research

3.2.1 Qualitative Research Methodology

This is a qualitative study. Qualitative research documents episodes of lived experiences of people. It biases the views and experiences of the research subjects as these experiences are represented by the research subjects themselves. The focus of qualitative research is to describe and interpret human practices without relying on quantitative data. McMillan and Schumacher (1997) explain that qualitative research describes, explains and analyses people's social actions, beliefs, thoughts and perceptions. Accordingly, a qualitative methodology enables researchers to study social and cultural phenomena (Myers, 2001) with the aim of obtaining a deeper understanding of people's experiences.

Myers (2001) stresses that, one of the useful qualities of qualitative research methodology is that, qualitative research gives the researcher an understanding into how

social, environmental and cultural contexts influence human behaviour. Conversely, the quantitative methodology has limitations when investigating cultural or social phenomena.

Adopting a qualitative approach to this study is an appropriate methodology since the study draws on the lived experiences of two administrators while investigating how workplace learning can be theorised within the context of a specific work site wherein the administrators learnt to become experts in their field of practice.

3.2.2 Research Approach: Case Study

A case study approach has been selected to conduct this research. Yin (1994: 13) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. Neuman, (1997: 331) advises that the case study allows the researcher to look for patterns in the lives, actions, and words of people in the context of the complete case as a whole. Similarly, Millar (1983:118) states that the case study methodology allows one to engage with the specific context within which the study is located. Accordingly, the case study approach is suitable when exploring the learning processes undergone by the subjects, Ayanda and Bongani, because this is a real life context influenced by both institutional and social factors.

One might question the sample size of this research of only two subjects, considering it too small. This, however, does not hamper the purpose of the research because the richness of the data collected from the subjects and depth of data analysis, compensate for the size of the sample. The analytical skills and capabilities of a researcher are therefore more important factors rather than the number of people sampled. This perspective is shared by McMillan and Schumacher (1997: 401) who state that:

The logic of a sample size is related to the purpose of the study, the research problem, the major data collection, the availability of the information-richness of the cases and the analytical skills of the researcher than on the sample size.

Regarding the chosen subjects and site for this research, McMillan & Schumacher, (1997: 393) stress that qualitative research requires a plan of choosing sites and participants and for beginning data collection. The subjects were chosen because they were the researcher's former colleagues and accordingly known to the researcher. The researcher had easy access to them since she is still in contact with the NGO. To ensure confidentiality, the subjects' names have been changed and the organisation's name is not revealed anywhere in the research.

McMillan and Schumacher (1997) advise that cases to be used must be information-rich. Accordingly, the researcher deliberately selected subjects who would be informative and knowledgeable about their tasks and who would provide rich and sufficient information for the investigation. Accordingly, the sample was purposeful which is defined by McMillan and Schumacher as follows:

Purposeful sampling in contrast to probabilistic is selecting small samples of information-rich cases to study in-depth when one wants to understand something about those cases without needing or desiring to generalise to all such cases (1997: 397).

3.3 Data Collection for the research

a. Planning

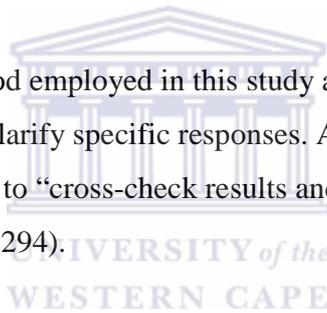
The data collection of this research started with planning which included identifying the site and subjects. This was followed by the researcher meeting with the CEO on January 30, 2007 and setting up appointments for a meeting with the CEO and the senior administrators of the NGO concerned. The researcher obtained permission to use the site (NGO) and materials that might be relevant to the research, as well as the administrators for the research, without problems from the CEO.

b. Data Collection and Data completion

Fortunately, the researcher did not have to first establish trust and a relationship with the subjects as they are well-known to her as colleagues. The researcher sent an email to Ayanda and Bongani with the request that they reflect on their experiences of being administrators within the institution. Their narrative started at the time they joined the institution. Their emailed responses assisted the researcher to formulate specific interview questions.

After the formulation of interview questions, the researcher set up appointments with the subjects and the CEO for interviews. All three interviews were conducted on the same day but at different times and in a private room supplied by the NGO. This process was followed by transcribing the interviews from the tape recorder.

The qualitative interview method employed in this study allowed that the interviewees be probed more deeply and/or to clarify specific responses. Accordingly, following Seal, an interview allows the researcher to “cross-check results and enhances confidence in the research findings” (Seal, 2004: 294).



3.4 Research Process

3.4.1 Literature Review

As advocated by researchers including Bless & Higson-Smith (2005) the continuous process of literature review has played an important role in sharpening the researcher’s theoretical framework for this study. Several readings therefore assisted in the formulation of scheduled interview questions for both subjects and the CEO. As already mentioned above, the literature review, did not end after the formulation of the interview questions but it has been a continuous process prompted by different factors including the responses of the different respondents.

3.4.2 E-mailing and Interviews

As already mentioned, data for this study has been gathered initially through an emailed interview followed by face-to-face interviews:

- a. E.mail interviews: After obtaining permission from the subjects and the CEO to be part of the research, the researcher sent e-mails requesting each subject to write a page or two about their recollections when first joining the NGO - how they joined the organisation; what positions they occupied; who they worked directly with; what jobs they had before joining; how they felt in their new positions; and the what they were expected do.
- b. Their e.mail responses were followed up by interpersonal contact interviews where interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The interviews of this research were both scheduled and structured [where there were fixed set of questions] as well as non-scheduled [where the subjects were given freedom to expand] as stressed by Bless & Higson-Smith (2005) as well as McMillan & Schumacher (1997). The types of questions asked were therefore structured, semi-structured and unstructured to allow probing and clarification by the researcher. This automatically also allowed respondents to be free to expand. The interviews were conducted at the subjects' workplace and thus in the subjects' settings. This is especially promoted by McMillan and Schumacher (1997: 391) when they suggest that in qualitative research, data is collected by interacting with the selected subjects in their settings.

3.5 Conclusion

This section presented the research methodology and its rationale. The following section describes and analyses the findings based on the data gathered.

SECTION 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This section describes and analyses the learning journeys of the two administrators from novices to experts. Data for the analysis is drawn from e-mail communication between the key informants and the researcher; interviews with administrators; interviews with the Chief Executive Officer of the educational non-governmental organisation; personal observation and reflection of researcher who periodically worked with the two administrators.

4.2 The research site

This section starts with a description of the research site since the nature and ethos of the organisation provided specific learning affordances (Billet, 2000).

The educational NGO, whilst focusing on education, works in the broad field of social justice. Philosophically, this means the promotion of respect, equality and dignity of all. To give effect to these philosophical principles, the principles had to be lived within the NGO. The implication was that all workers/employees were treated with respect and their experiences and prior knowledge were valued and acknowledged as beneficial, worthwhile and a resource to the entire organisation. Accordingly, new employees were not treated as empty slates that first needed to receive the wisdom of the 'old-timers' before they could make valuable contributions. Rather, 'new comers' were invited as full participants in the work processes from inception.

A democratic space that facilitated and encouraged learning was operative within the NGO. All employees were learners as well as teachers: the teacher/learner role depended

on the specific task the employee was involved in; their responsibility in relation to the task; and their prior knowledge related to the task.

Whilst politics related to power and authority within the NGO remained structured in job positions, the (democratic) philosophy of the organisation provides numerous opportunities for learning or provided learning affordances for old and new employees.

4.3 How the subjects learnt

This section presents the findings and analyses these findings as these relate to explaining the processes involved in workplace learning - specifically how the two novice administrators transformed into expert administrators.

4.3.1 Learning through teachings and support

During interviews with the subjects, it became evident that teachings and support from supervisors and peers played an integral part in the learning journey of the research subjects when they started working at this educational NGO as both had limited knowledge regarding operating computers, crucial for their service delivery.

Ayanda recalled that when she joined the organisation she knew “nothing about computers” because she had been working for a law firm where her job tasks were limited to “data-capturing” on a mechanical type-writer and “being a messenger”. She however was expected to “type this and that” for her boss at her new workplace. Even though she learnt typing at high school, they used mechanical type-writers not computers then. Ayanda confessed that she “did not know where to start” when she was required to type documents for her boss, but her supervisor Gerry taught her the “ins and outs of a computer” (Ayanda, interview: July 12, 2007). Gerry, her supervisor would teach her all the time when she was expected to type something on the computer until she could type on her own. After teaching her a certain skill on the computer, Gerry would leave her with “real” tasks to complete as well as practise of the ‘new’ skill. Whilst practising,

Ayanda would work independently without her supervisor's interference. However, Gerry instructed her to ask any time she found herself unable to proceed with any given task. Ayanda was specifically taught the MSDOS operating systems - a programme designed for typing documents at the time.

Ayanda's interview also confirmed that she did not only receive advice and support from her immediate supervisor but also from her peers whom she said were willing to help at any time she needed assistance. She even managed to have a friendship relationship with Tammy, one of her peers, who was in her age-group. (Ayanda, interview: July12, 2007).

It is evident that Ayanda had joined a community of practice which included her peers and supervisor. Also, as emphasised by Wenger (1998), Ayanda participated in this community by applying knowledge from her supervisor and peers and the prior knowledge of keyboard helped her. However, proponents of Human Capital like Schultz (1993) would see a shortcoming in Ayanda's learning being a lack of formal recognition e.g. a certificate, when Ayanda could work independently. During an interview, it became obvious that Ayanda was worried that she did not have any formal post-matriculation qualifications. She raised this concern after she joined the organisation and has plans to register with a formal institution in the near future.

Bongani, on the other hand, found things reasonably easy and basic when he started working at this organisation. Despite this, he acknowledges that his supervisor taught him a great deal about the job requirements. Bongani reported that "he (his supervisor) taught me what I needed to know" regarding computers (Interview with Bongani: July12, 2007). He also admitted that his knowledge about computers was minimal when he joined the organisation and just like Ayanda, he was expected to work on the computers. His computer tasks included working on the programme *Excel*. His supervisor introduced him to the *Excel* computer programme and taught him all that was expected of him in order to perform his daily tasks. When Bongani was taught by his supervisor, he would watch and listen, while his supervisor showed him on the computer. His supervisor would afterwards give him instructions on what to do and Bongani would

do as instructed while the supervisor was watching. His supervisor's instructions took the "form of explanations, direct instructions and practical activities" (July 12, 2007).

Bongani's supervisor would only be satisfied with his (Bongani's) progress when it became obvious that Bongani understood. It is only at this point that the supervisor would ask Bongani to perform tasks independently. The supervisor encouraged Bongani to seek his assistance by saying that when he (Bongani) got stuck, "his [supervisor's] door was open". Bongani was encouraged and he made use of the opportunities to ask for help whenever the need arose.

As was the case with Ayanda, Bongani mentioned that besides being assisted by his supervisor, he was also assisted by a colleague called Terry who later became his wife (Bongani's e.mail correspondence: March 5, 2007).

This study has shown that Ayanda and Bongani's computer learning and teaching was solely at their workplace. They both did not register with any formal institution for their computer learning. The success story of their computer learning at the workplace however, contradicts modern society's perception of gaining 'worthwhile' knowledge. According to Barnett (1994), modern society believes that knowledge is gained only through formal learning processes. Ayanda and Bongani's computer learning resulted from the learning affordances that became available within the organisation that employed them. Even though no formal curriculum was present, the work context and requirement became the envelopes of individualised curricula. They were taught and they learnt those skills that were immediately relevant to their job context and requirements, rather than being sent on a training programme that would have taught them generic administrative skills. The examples of Ayanda's and Bongani's computer learning, confirm Guile and Young's (1998) notion that institutions like workplaces strengthen the skill base of their future workforce.

Furthermore, Bongani and Ayanda's computer learning confirm that for adults to learn effectively, they have to relate their learning to their careers and the learning needs to be meaningful. The above notion was stressed in a conference that was held at Velmore

Conference Estate near Pretoria, South Africa (June: 2007), where Wenger emphasised that for adults to learn effectively, they have to relate their learning to their careers.

According to him, as long as learners feel that what they are learning is not meaningful, they will not learn. It is interesting to note that both subjects were taught programmes that were meaningful to their career development within this institution. Ayanda was taught only *MSDOS* not the *EXCEL* computer programme because the nature of her immediate work task required that she type documents while Bongani was taught only *EXCEL* not *MSDOS* since his work related to accounting , financing and book-keeping that required *EXCEL* competence.

As already discussed, the teachings and support received by Ayanda and Bongani were structured and intentional and they were based on the individual needs at a particular time. Accordingly, this study agrees with Marsick & Watkin's (1990) whose perspective contradicts the fact that learning at the workplace is ad hoc because it lacks a curriculum for teacher reference, qualified teachers to deliver it and didactic practice. Both Ayanda and Bongani's learning has been successful without teachers, curriculum and didactic practice. Their learning has also not been ad-hoc because they were taught exactly what they needed to know in order to perform their tasks as opposed to being taught generic computer operations.

Billet (2004) points out another critical point, namely, that workplace learning ensures interactions between humans and non-human artifacts and these interactions lead to humans performing well. Our subjects have confirmed their interactions with humans (supervisors and peers) through the teachings of their peers and supervisors as well as through their daily interactions with non-human artifacts like computers, crucial for the performance of their tasks.

Even though there were other examples of direct teaching, the two examples suffice to show that workplace learning happens through teaching and support.

4.3.2 Learning through collaboration and working as a team

Teamwork and collaboration amongst peers were found to be significant in the learning journey of both Ayanda and Bongani. Therefore, team-work and collaboration with peers afforded our subjects the opportunity to learn.

The structure of the organisation facilitated a democratic environment. Workers were not only employees, but their working activities contributed to social changes with the purpose of establishing social justice. Accordingly, employees operated in the organisation as a collective rather than individuals. This resulted in an atmosphere of mutual support where guidance and decisions were open to questioning and as Wenger (1998) stressed, meaning was negotiated amongst all role-players.

Ayanda reported that interacting and liaising with foreign embassy staff were the responsibilities of the supervisor. Maintaining cordial relationships with foreign embassies were critical to the survival of the organisation since foreign governments were funding the activities of the organisation. Ayanda shared an office with her supervisor which gave her an insight into how to interact with foreign embassy staff. Sometimes she and/or her supervisor would initiate a discussion about why certain things were raised in a particular manner during the telephonic conversation with embassy staff. Ayanda would listen to the reasons provided by her supervisor and sometimes she even suggested alternative approaches.

The above is an example that confirms how collective activity affords learning opportunity in contrast to working in isolation. The close working relationship that Ayanda had with her supervisor assisted her to learn the contextual knowledge and skills associated with social interaction between the organisation and their clients. This allowed Ayanda to interact competently with embassy staff telephonically without needing to be given lessons on the processes and procedures.

Ayanda's competence in communicating telephonically with strangers and people in important positions is confirmed and celebrated by the CEO of the organisation who said that many people from different organisations reported that his secretary is "such a pleasure to talk with over the phone [CEO, interview: July 12, 2007]." During the interview with the CEO, he also said that when Ayanda speaks over the phone, "one feels the positive vibe" (July 12, 2007).

Confirming collaboration with the supervisor, Ayanda reported that as much as she was surrounded by people who were willing to help her, including her supervisor, she also helped her supervisor "a lot with other projects especially with their invoices, preparing to send away stuff" (Ayanda, interview: July 12, 2007). This confirms that Ayanda was not the only beneficiary of learning but that the organisation also benefited from her insights that were acquired experientially and brought into the organisation.

Regarding Bongani, his prior knowledge of Business Economics, Economics and Accountancy which he studied at school, enabled him to do some of his work-related tasks. However, this knowledge was also critical when he needed to learn new knowledge within the above fields. Following Brunner (1986), knowledge construction builds upon current and previous knowledge and experiences brought to new contexts or environments.

However, over time, the organisation was receiving more projects and with this new insight, he was required to perform the tasks competently. Under these circumstances, his supervisor would assist and guide him. Despite his (supervisor) extensive knowledge base, there were times when Bongani's supervisor was unable to solve a conceptual problem related to their work task. This resulted in Bongani and his supervisor having to negotiate the best solutions for a problem. This is an example of collaboratively learning.

Similarly, when Bongani was unsure of how to proceed with a task, he would approach his supervisor for guidance. If his supervisor did not have an immediate answer, they

would collaboratively seek a solution. Accordingly, Bongani states that his supervisor acknowledged that he was, in fact, learning from Bongani's questions.

“There was a lot of working together” (Bongani, interview: July 12 2007). The affordance of mutual engagement between Bongani and his supervisor was an advantage to the organisation. Without this affordance, Bongani's supervisor would not have learnt from his subordinate's new ideas and knowledge.

Responding to the question asked by the researcher on what his role was when and if there were problems of under-spending or over-spending, Bongani replied, “I must be honest that everything was a team effort. Both of us would sit down and plan our reports”. This clearly shows that in this organisation's different sections, there were few limitations as to who was responsible for what, but rather there was a culture of exposing new employees to different activities irrespective of positions occupied by the employees and afforded learning through team-work.

This working together, the team effort that Bongani talks about, as well as the close working relationship between Ayanda and her supervisor, are a confirmation of what constructivists like Haller et al (2000) preach. They state that learning is an active process wherein a learner constructs his/her knowledge through collaborating with others.

As already indicated, the way in which employees interact with each other at this organisation gave the subjects an opportunity to freely ask for help from their supervisors as new challenges emerged with new projects. It is also clear that the subjects' curiosity, interests in their work and questions were of assistance to their supervisors' own career growths as well. This interaction process between the subjects and their supervisors confirms what Bruner (1986) describes as people learning through collaboration with others and at the same time negotiating meaning with them and which is not simply a transfer of knowledge from the old to the new employee.

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

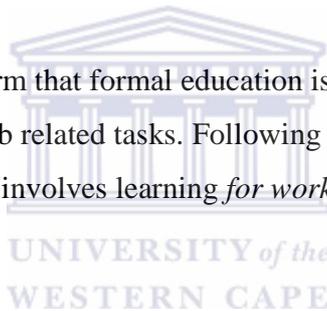
5.1 Introduction

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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