CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: LEARNING FROM WORK BASED PROJECTS

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Abstract: The learning process in action research provides the means to create knowledge by involving colleagues in negotiation and mediating of knowledge accumulated through multiple perspectives and dialogue. Therefore, the collaborative effort of the colleagues for change oriented actions and improvement of working practices is significant within the work context. The purpose of the study is to report on the reflections and learning of colleagues taken from work based research projects within an action research process in order to understand how those processes contributed to construct knowledge and professional development. The notion of lifelong learning and continuing professional development shows the significance of conducting action researches to enhance learning of others and learning from others in work settings. In this respect, it is essential to determine the importance of data collection techniques in action research processes. Qualitative research methods, including researcher diary and notes and personal observations as professionals, were used to reveal the impact of negotiation, reflection and collaborative efforts on co-constructing knowledge in improving the working practices through action research process. Experiences and reflections of the professionals were analyzed thematically and triangulated. Findings revealed that negotiation and reflection are the essential elements for constructing knowledge within the constructivist paradigm for professional learning. In addition, action research plays the important role of embracing the colleagues' collaborative efforts and mutual engagement for change oriented actions within the work places, with the aim to improve the working practices.

Keywords: action research, lifelong learning, professional development, reflection, work-based project

Introduction

Higher education shifts their practices by the notion of continuous professional development, lifelong learning, knowledge based and learning organizations. In this respect, work-based learning is learning through work that relies on independent and collaborative learning. It is self-management learning with the support of work-place mentors and various types of learning and guidance materials (Johnson, 2001). The development of work-based learning depends on prior learning and experience of the researchers as practitioners. Therefore, deep learning is experienced through work based projects where the experiential learning cycle is followed by structuring perceptual experiences. The experiential learning process is divided into the following steps:

- Definition of the problem.
- Analysis and understanding of the problem.
- Generation of possible options to solve the problem.
- Choice of the most appropriate option.

- Implementation of the chosen solution.
- Evaluation of the result.

In order to sort the real workplace problem out, the adoption of action learning supports the individuals learning abilities with four activities enhancing the work based learning. Namely these activities are; experiential learning, creative problem solving, organization of relevant knowledge and co-learner group support. Activities that are employed in both action learning support the view that provide insights to realize how work based learning incorporate learning theories (Johnson, 2001). For the development of work based learning, there is an essential need to consider new commitments to the life long learning. In this respect, learning in the work place contributes to develop skills enhancement, employability and capacity to deal with change in relation to the personal development learners (Lam et al., 2000).

Moreover, conducting projects for the work setting within work based learning processes help to create highly skilled and flexible workforce, along with an economic stability and up-to-date skills and knowledge (Keeling et al., 1998). A learning project is an instrument for members in a work place to organize learning activities systematically around a central work-related theme or problem. Learning projects are aimed to find out solutions of work problems and to improve professional practices at work. Working people are key characters in the work setting to organize learning activities and projects (Poell, 2001).

Strong pressures and changes are bridging the gap between higher education in the workplace and the industry environment. Due to this reason, the work based learning process gains importance because it improves practices in the workplace and also the industry learning environment (Malfroy & Yates, 2003). To provide a roadmap for the personal and professional contexts for the workers' reflections, work based projects become essential as a reflective practice (Leitch & Day, 2001). In this respect, the construction of knowledge becomes an important process of sharing and managing to address the utility of research outcomes.

The action research and collaborative research advocate doing research 'with' practitioners. Action research is based on changing practices by producing changes in a concrete situation. It relies on a set of action–reflection cycles. Further to this, collaborative research brings closer the world of research and the world of practice and mediates between these two cultures in order to construct knowledge. In work based learning process, both researches approaches play a great role for professional development creating a spirit of reflexive community and community of practice (Argyropoulos & Nikolaraizi, 2009; Savoie-Zajc & Descamps-Bednarz, 2007). There is intensified need to change classic techniques and strategies which can be done by reflecting on collaborative research projects and action research projects to advance an agenda for inclusion bringing or conveying changes to institutional cultures and practices (Vogrinc & Zuljan, 2009).

The underlying principles of action research – reciprocity, reflexivity and reflection are essential in work based research projects for a continuum of critically reflective practice. It is seen that knowledge can be created but also it is used for the benefits of work places and practitioners (Robertson, 2000). In work based research projects, action research and collaborative research are employed to change and develop working practices. Within this research process focus groups are key data collection techniques within qualitative research settings (Parker & Tritter, 2006).The focus group is a tool for collecting qualitative data through moderated group discussion that facilitates and encourages sharing of ideas and a depth understanding of the issues (Breen, 2006; Minnis et al., 1997).

In this research study, the term of work based learning is incorporated by lifelong learning and continuing professional development through work based projects. Learning can be advocated through action research and collaborative research to promote reflective practices for the benefits of both practitioners and working place. In this respect, sharing work experiences based on negotiation and

reflection within action research put forwards how worker researchers play a key role to construct professional and organizational knowledge. Focus groups are the main data collection techniques to enhance dynamic of communication, sharing among research participants and workers researchers. The aim of this research study to explore reflection of worker researchers' experiences through work based research projects and to interpret their learning cycles within continuing professional development. In this respect, following research questions are set;

- How worker researchers perceive work based research projects?
- How worker researches perceive their learning in continuing professional development?
- How worker researchers enhance their practical knowledge through work based research projects and research approach, techniques?

Methodology

The qualitative research method employed in this study used words and researchers' experiences in order to provide insights to co-construct knowledge. Three different work based research projects were used for this purpose. Practitioners reflections on-action (Schon, 1983) upon their experiences with work based research projects were used, a case study approach was employed to answer at the "how" questions in order to explore interpretations in professional fields (Yin, 1994). The practitioners are here defined as researchers' professionals, as opposed to the traditional professional researches, and in this role they rightly fulfil the work-based research approach (Costley & Armsby, 2007). Three work-based projects were purposefully reflected as a sample with a voluntary participation. The three research experiences in different research contexts enhance credibility of the findings. Data collection methods including researcher diary, notes and personal interviews were used to interpret perceptions of researchers about work based research projects, their learning within continuing professional development, and their reflection through collaborative efforts within action research process. Collected qualitative data were analysed thematically and triangulated. The experiences of three different professionals by different projects reflected the credibility of research findings (Silverman, 2005).

Findings and Results

The findings of this research show that reflections and negotiation are essential elements in order to construct knowledge within the constructivist paradigm in a professional working environment. The findings also show that the collaborative efforts and mutual engagement between colleagues for change oriented action improved their working practice.

One of the participants wrote:

"Creating mutual understanding was the key success factor and I therefore concentrated fully on creating a good flow of communication"

Another comment was as follows:

"Action research helped me understand how to interpret "two plus two equals to five" and showed me that synergy in activities and between myself and participants played a great role in achieving the goals and objectives of the research"

And again:

'As a result of my participatory action research, the collaborative efforts of volunteer participants and myself contributed change and development in creating a team work culture within the organization and developing the generic skills of students'

The research also showed that engaging in a work based research provides additional challenges, because the worker-researcher needs to find the right balance between his professional capacity and his research engagement. The following sentences were recorded:

"I had dual roles as worker and researcher which created a substantial workload during the research process"

Another participant wrote also:

"I had to manage my dual roles as worker and researcher and cope with a heavy load of teaching as well as responsibilities as an executive peer journal reviewer"

However at the same time the work based research proved to be an effective tool in order to generate knowledge in the workplace for the workplace within the constructivist paradigm, as recorded from one of the participant.

"The work-based approach was surely beneficial as I wasn't a 'professional researcher',on the contrary I was a 'researcher-professional' at ease in his own practice"

The worker researchers perceive therefore their work-based research project as an important tool in order to generate knowledge through the use of reflection and negotiation. They also perceive that their continuing professional development was enhanced by the engagement in a research that was grounded into a working context; this has in fact developed and changed their practice and professional knowledge. This professional knowledge was actually enhanced by the participatory action research projects, which provided changes and development in the professional practice based on the constructivist approach and a teamwork culture.

Discussion and Conclusion

This qualitative research provided insights on the notion of lifelong learning and continuing professional development that underlined the significance of conducting action researches in work settings. This research gives valuable findings on enhancing learning of others and learning from others in work settings (Norton et al., 2010). In a co-construction of professional knowledge, work based projects become a great change to reveal critical analysis and reflection ability on learning process (Malfroy & Yates, 2003). In this respect, this research yielded reflection and critique to learning; shared colleagues' work experiences based on negotiation and reflection within the action research paradigm are significant in the construction of knowledge. This research study relies on mutual engagement in a collective interactive process for professional learning and experiences (Lam et al., 2006; Smith & Betts, 2000).

This research study shows that the learning process in action research creates knowledge by involving colleagues in negotiation and mediation of knowledge, as it is accumulated through multiple perspectives and dialogue. Therefore colleagues' collaborative effort for change oriented actions and improvement of working practices is significant within the work context (Savoie-Zajc & Descamps-Bednarz, 2007).

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