# Time to Learn. Exploring Workplace Learning Affordances in a High-Pressure Work Environment

**1. Summary and Introduction**

The present study addresses the research question, ***How is learning conditioned and realized in call centres as high-intensity workplaces?***
It has employed a case study approach which seemed particularly useful in exploring a specific work environment with regard to revealing the inter-connections between work practices and the socio-technical context as well as activities and processes that, with or without the members’ awareness, may be related to learning in the workplace. The study capitalizes on a post-positivist epistemological position including interpretivist and constructivist perspectives with regard to the indivisibility of research, researcher and the researched, and takes place within an emergent methodological framework that has been called action ethnography (Eden and Huxham 2006). The former have modelled the overall approach to the data analysis process for exploring individual experiences and understanding local practices. The latter comprises an action research approach with an analytical focus, and was a natural choice of method as the project included extended periods of dwelling and acting in the field as both observer and active participant in workplace activities. The combination of the two methodological dimensions frames the role of the researcher as ‘constructionist consultant’ (Czarniawska 2008) or ‘change agent’ (Gummesson 2001), i.e. an actor who tries to capture, analyze and elucidate the context of practice, and assists in rendering the research findings conceivable and compatible with the participants’ self-understanding so that they can be used constructively in generating reflection and change.

Research in call centre work represents a still emerging empirical field (Russell 2008). The literature reviewed deals mainly with the overall organization of work in call centres either from a socio-economic point of view or from an employment relations perspective. The former discusses the emergence of call centres in response to demands for cost-efficiency of service due to market deregulations and global competition (Ellis and Taylor 2006, Arzbächer et al. 2002). In this perspective, call centres embody a dual logic of service production, i.e. efficiency and customization (Korczynsky 2001). The research on employment relations is concerned with the coercive deployment of labour in call centres where employee behaviour is regulated according to strict operating procedures (Bain and Taylor 2000, Fernie and Metcalf 1998, Batt 1999). More recently, researchers have been sensitized to the relative degree of variation among call centres regarding occupational identity, development opportunities, employee latitude and access to discretionary work (Holman 2004, Smith et al. 2008), as well as to the active role of employees in negotiating, resisting or exploiting current working conditions (Rosenthal 2004). However, there seems to be little evidence of individual experiences with working in a call centre and how employees deal with, make sense of and give meaning to their work. It is this particular angle to learning that this study aims at clarifying, i.e., a perspective of learning as an integral part of the work practice and the way it is practiced and experienced by practitioners.

The dissertation is composed of three self-sustained articles which represent a threefold specification of the research question:

***How is learning conditioned and realized in call centres as high-intensity workplaces?***

The first article[[1]](#footnote-1) with the title “Seizing workplace learning affordances in high-pressure work environments” is an answer to the question:

 *Which instances of work-related learning can be found in a call centre as a high-intensity workplace?*

The second article, “Learning to cope, solve and evolve in a call centre”[[2]](#footnote-2), elaborates on the mutual interrelationships between work and learning:

 *In which ways is learning formed in the interplay between the particularities of the work practice and the manner in which this is enacted and experienced by the employees in a given social setting?*

The third article, “Time to learn. Leaders’ learning orientation and the HCM-turn in call centres”[[3]](#footnote-3), represents a developmental perspective on learning in the context of work in that it seeks to clarify the significance of learning orientation at operational management’s level in relation to both employees and the upper organization. It answers the question:

 *How can learning be realized in a call centre organization as an integrated dimension in the processes that accompany the production of service?*

The three articles represent at the same time the main stages in the progression of the research process. The first article, “Seizing workplace learning affordances in high-pressure work environments” is based on the first stage of inquiry. It involves a 3600 scrutiny of the workplace environment and the exercise of developing sensitivity to the context of research in the attempt to uncover existing manifestations of workplace learning. Against expectations of poor, repetitive learning regarding service products and work routines associated with neo-Tayloristic work systems present in call centres, this investigation has revealed an instance of rich and significant learning taking place in the wake of what was identified as an employee initiative to work development. The particular case suggests that structural inhibitors and adverse learning conditions can, in the meeting with young people with various identity and occupational goals, paradoxically provide a scope for agentic action and expand learning to the extent of either resisting or, as in this case, reforming the system. The further analysis has described this case of workplace learning as the manifestation of agency based on the activation of structural properties (Giddens 1984) by ontogenetically motivated individuals (i.e. their psycho-social determination) coming from a variety of experiential backgrounds and expectations. The case is regarded as an instance of significant learning as it has entailed the active engagement of self-directed individuals seizing the opportunity to reform existing practice norms. The learning process has also involved cooperation with peers, including the revaluation of the knowledge and experience of the older generation employees. It has been further enabled by the subjectivity of local managers and their decisions to allow for a certain amount of time and employee latitude, though not without an interest in the economic gain following the initiative.

The second article, “Learning to cope, solve and evolve in a call centre”, sums up the successive stage of the inquiry which focuses on a more in-depth scrutiny of lived work experiences accessed through a collection of employee testimonies in the form of non-structured video based work logs in order to study how work and learning may be further interrelated. The aim of this process was to uncover patterns of informal learning in a high-pressure workplace in the way learning may form an integral part of the work practice and the social constitution of the workplace. The study revealed that call centre employees seek to achieve a satisfactory experience at work and engage spontaneously in a variety of informal learning processes in order to cope with work pressure and solve work-related problems. There is also a developmental dimension to the informal learning encountered, which involves reflection, self-directed inquiry and peer learning, and can be described as an overall attempt to advance the field of practice from a neo-Tayloristic production mode towards an empowered work design. It has been found that informal learning at work assumes a different character depending on the internal, ideally balanced correlation of three factors: 1) the complexity of work problems, 2) the support facilities available, and 3) individuals’ capacity to self-manage. The different configurations of this function display varying qualities of learning, from narrowly focused reproductive and adaptive types, to more evolutionary forms, i.e. developmental and expanding learning. This can be regarded as a further development of Ellström’s workplace learning taxonomy (2001) to include the informal types of learning in their dynamic interplay with corresponding ways of enacting and experiencing work. The preponderance of reproductive and adaptive learning in the given case is related to the dominating trend towards standardization in the call centre service production. Nevertheless, by neglecting employees’ need for developmental learning to address complex problems and enhance job latitude, management not only miss the opportunity to develop the quality of work, but also risk confining employees to self-ruling and even extreme ways of tackling job problems.

The third article, “Time to learn. Leaders’ learning orientation and the HCM-turn in call centres”, represents the active exploration stage in the research process, which focuses on ways to articulate a learning discourse in this particular workplace. It has among other data involved the researcher’s active engagement in initiating and facilitating a series of action learning cycles as a forum for bringing learning on the agenda. The inquiry centres here particularly on the role of operational management in the daily dealings at work, as distinct from the common understanding of management as synonymous with organizational rationality. The findings show that shop floor managers play a complex role as mediators between the structural rationality governing the workplace and working realities, which is in tune with previous research (Houlihan 2001). This role involves active processes of interpretation and meaning creation between individual managers and their subordinates as well as the establishment of significant relationships in view of accomplishing organizational goals. Learning orientation has been identified as a potentially significant leadership quality in, firstly, promoting reflexivity among leaders themselves to guide their ongoing, multifaceted negotiations between structural demands for efficiency on the one hand, and developing employee commitment, on the other. Secondly, learning-oriented leaders are likely to tie stronger bonds of trust to their employees as they will be more responsive to employee learning needs related to coping, solving and evolving through work, which incidentally centres on issues of the quality of their interaction with customers. Learning orientation can thus be regarded as enhancing the local development of high-commitment management, aimed at eliciting employee goodwill in supporting the dual strategy of customization and efficiency pursued by call centre organizations (Korczynsky 2002, Kinnie et al. 2000). Finally, leaders’ learning orientation may extend to the upper organization in the form of increasingly well articulated feedback from operational management who hold a key position at the meeting point between organization and customers and are therefore potentially valuable knowledge contributors to the organizational strategic decision making process. Frontline managers can and are seemingly willing to pioneer in introducing a learning orientation in call centres to supplement the exclusive focus on performance-oriented goal achievement by a space to process job issues and negotiate shared meaning. Moreover, there are obvious long-term organizational benefits in evolving learning orientation as learning oriented employees develop subjectivity and situational sensitivity which results in superior performance regarding the quality of customer service, this being one of the main competitive differentiators in the industry. The short-term pressure for efficiency and the “tyranny of time”, as one of the team leaders has expressed it, can be moderated not by competing on time and resources, but by a different use of time. This requires a change in attitude, i.e. developing a reflective gaze on practice which sums up to qualitatively enhanced and developmental informal workplace learning.

This study investigates how learning is conditioned and realized in a high-intensity work environment within the specific context of a mass-producing service organization such as a call center. In order to assess the scope of learning in this type of workplace, the inquiry relies on an interpretive analysis of the way in which practitioners enact, manage and experience the world of work, and the learning processes contained therein. The single-case study approach serves well the purpose of this study in that it allows for the exploration of a little known area, i.e. the study of mutual inter-relationships between work and learning, in its natural environment (Yin 2009). The specific findings are not amenable to generalization to other types of high-pressure work, nor can they cover the rich diversity of call centre services that pervade widely across occupational and business sectors. These findings are more aptly valued in the context of analytic generalization (idem) as they offer an empirically based interpretive account of work-related learning that may enrich and consolidate existing theory on practice-based learning, especially regarding socio-genetical perspectives on learning.

1. The article was published in: *Vocations and Learning: Studies in vocational and professional education*. The original publication is available at www.springerlink.com, DOI: 10.1007/s12186-010-9042-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The article was submitted for publication in: *Journal of Workplace Learning*, Manuscript ID: JWL – Aug – 2010 – 0052. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The article has been submitted for publishing in: *Human ressource Management Journal,* Manuscript ID: 10-HRMJ-01689. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)