

## EDITORIAL

# WORKPLACE LEARNING: LEARNING, WORK, AND RESEARCH IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY

As most learning in adulthood is linked with work, the relationship between adult education and work is very intense and multi-layered. UNESCO's *4th Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (2019) found that nearly 75% of adult education is work-related, and OECD's research as part of the *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies* (PIAAC) estimates that this percentage is even higher, between 85% and 95% (Desjardins, 2020). According to the *Adult Education Survey* (Eurostat 2020), in Europe this type of education is at 79.4%.

Work-related learning and adult education have been a subject of extensive theoretical discussion and empirical research. Researchers have been examining work-related knowledge, expertise, competencies, points of view, values, emotional and social skills, practical wisdom, workplace spirituality, and ethics; they are interested in learning strategies and different target groups, career transitions as well as concepts such as agency, open innovation, sustainability, and long-term employability (Alessandrini, 2018). International organisations (OECD, ILO, EU) have also been paying particular attention to work-related learning with strategies for professional skills development and projections about work in the future (cf. Tikkanen, Hovdhaugen, & Støren, 2018). In Slovenia the needs that arise from the development of education are also dealt with by the Ministry of Economic Development and Technology's action plan to increase productivity (cf. Domadenik, 2020). It lists investing in knowledge, education, and training of both employees and those waiting for work among the key factors of increasing productivity. Researchers who focus on workplace learning deal with digitalisation and robotisation as well as learning connected with these two processes; they also explore the fourth industrial revolution and questions about new cognitive and emotional competencies involved in peer learning (cf. Riera Claret, Sahagun, & Selva, 2020) as well as questions of abuse and workplace bullying (Bošljančič, 2019).

The relationship between learning, education, training and work is influenced on various levels: (a) at the level of the individual, e.g., by life transitions and personal development, (b) at the level of the organisation, e.g., by the learning environment and creation of new knowledge, and (c) at the socio-political level, e.g., by internationalisation, globalisation,

digitalisation, societal ageing, and migration (Bohlinger, Haake, Helms Jørgensen, Toivainen, & Wallo, 2015).

*Workplace learning* is now becoming a necessary component of work and can signify an individual process that occurs as individual learning, or a group process that happens through dialogue and cooperation among co-workers or in the form of mentorships in an organisation, as well as organisational learning, i.e., where learning is built into the organisation's systems, policies, procedures, work process and information systems as well as the organisational thought models, and this knowledge is incorporated into products and services (Sutherland Olsen, & Tikkanen, 2018; Tynjälä, 2013).

In the past learning and education were seen as preparation for work, work came after education, which prepared the individual for work. In the 1980s workplace learning became increasingly important (of course not negating the importance of learning and education as preparation for work), and since the 1990s more and more authors have been writing about work and learning as two activities that are intertwined: learning and work are integrated (npr. Stenström & Tynjälä, 2009; Tynjälä, Stenström, & Saarnivaara, 2012). Workplace learning also begins integrating with research of its own practice and introducing innovations, which also include special strategies such as design thinking.

Organised education for work – both formal and nonformal education – as well as informal workplace learning are seen as a system of constant knowledge formation: work becomes the environment where the individual and the group are formed and transformed. The networks between learning and work that change both work and learning are implied in Gorz's thoughts on the end of exploitative labour (cf. Gorz, 2020). Researchers and knowledge managers are trying to find ways to connect work and informal learning. The purpose behind this and the results vary: in certain environments they predominantly support increased profit, in other examples they develop new practices and transform relationships. Communities of practice and interest groups are created, with quick transfer of knowledge and the development of professional identity and commitment. Connectivity is gaining more and more importance in informal learning. It refers to the processes aimed at creating relationships and connections among various elements – including different forms of knowledge – in learning situations, which brings everything together into ecosystems of learning (Nacamura & Lazazzara, 2019) or ecologies for learning (Barnett & Jackson, 2019).

In the last 30 years, since more in-depth research of workplace learning has been happening, the interest of the research community in concepts such as tacit knowledge, learning organisation, and knowledge management has shifted toward concepts such as creative knowledge work, digital workplace learning, innovative knowledge, practical wisdom, resilience, and workplace well-being (Dhiman, 2020).

Professional practices are changing rapidly, so it is a challenge to modern organisations to perceive and encourage the learning of its employees and develop a culture of workplace learning. This means involving all generations, enabling intergenerational knowledge transfer, and using various methods (e.g. mentorship, learning through mimicking,

combined learning, advising, monitoring, guidance). Concerning the latter, Quagliano (2014) and Rago (2010) also describe using art (theatre, music or film methods) in an organisation, while Radovan, Kristl and Makovec (2019) point out the rapidly increasing number of different methods of online learning and connecting in a virtual environment.

A challenge of workplace learning in particular and adult education in general is today posed by the *COVID-19 pandemic*. Organisations have had to adapt to new circumstances very quickly. The pandemic has deeply affected or even brought to a halt certain economic sectors (e.g. tourism, transport, the oil and automotive industries) and entire educational systems; it has sparked many concerns, including in adult education (e.g. how to decrease social inequalities and not increase them and include adults from vulnerable groups into distance learning) (Boeren, Roumell, & Roessger, 2020). It has also triggered a lot of workplace learning and precipitated growth in certain economic sectors (e.g. information technology, pharmacy). In the very short time since its outbreak, the pandemic has led to the development of special programs for distance learning and working from home as well.

This thematic edition of *Studies in Adult Education and Learning* encompasses five articles in which the authors reflect on the challenges of learning and working from various theoretic perspectives and by using diverse research approaches. The relationships between learning, work and research are studied predominantly on the meso (articles by Annabel Jenner, Kristinka Ovesni, and Igor Ivašković) and micro levels (articles by Danijela Blanuša Trošelj, Karla Franković, Milena Valenčič Zuljan, and Marjeta Šarić).

Annabel Jenner's article, *How Can Individual Learning at the Workplace Contribute to Organisational Learning? An Adult Education Perspective on Requirements and Boundaries*, explores the relationship between individual and organisational learning, stemming from social systems theory. Her qualitative research set in Germany studies the processes of communication that help transform individual into organisational learning. She has found that the individual's contribution to organisational learning does not depend only on the processes of learning connected to work but also to structural conditions in the workplace.

Kristinka Ovesni's *Organisational Climate and the Work-Related Learning of Employees: An Andragogical Perspective* presents research on organisational climate and employee learning. After conducting an empirical study in Serbia by using both quantitative and qualitative methods, Ovesni presents three models of organisational climate related to workplace learning – the organisational climate of fear of repression, the service-oriented organisational climate, and the organisational climate that is supportive of learning. She comes to the conclusion that an organisational climate that encourages learning needs to be developed and that andragogues need to be engaged in this work.

Igor Ivašković's article, *The Dilemmas of Monitoring the Effects Learning Has on Organisational Performance*, studies the issues of monitoring the results of learning in the organisational context. A detailed analysis of the literature leads to findings on the complexity and the necessity of monitoring the effects of learning. The author finds that

monitoring learning requires knowledge of the organisational context, while the process of planned learning and its results need to be monitored in a multi-dimensional way (including environmental, organisational, and individual factors) and on multiple levels.

In *Preschool Teachers' Involvement in Informal Learning as an Important Factor of Their Professional Development*, Danijela Blanuša Trošelj, Karla Franković, and Milena Valenčič Zuljan look at preschool teachers' involvement into certain forms of informal learning – by sharing experiences and materials, reflective practices, and learning from others – and how these influence preschool teachers' professional development. Preschool teachers from Croatia participated in quantitative research which finds that preschool teachers most often participate in informal learning, which includes arrangements about how to work with colleagues from the group and document the children's activities.

Marjeta Šarić's article, entitled *The Role of Emotions in Workplace Learning*, analyses the psychological and social psychological literature to define the meaning and role emotions play in workplace learning. Nowadays, we are paying more and more attention to the meaning of emotions in the workplace, even though the author finds that research is fragmented due to various theoretical starting points. Based on a review of the literature, she points out the significance the emotional experiences of employees have during workplace learning and argues that the important role emotions play in learning needs to be kept in mind when encouraging workplace learning.

Along with the thematic articles the issue also includes an open article, a report, a reply, a review, and three book reviews. Barbara Samaluk's *Integration as a Multi-Way Process: A Case Study of Innovative Migrant Integration Projects in Slovenia* finds that these projects are set up by proactive activists with the help of EU funds for the purpose of professionalising the activity and establishing partnerships and networks to develop needs-based, cross-sectional services that empower migrants and establish professional norms and standards for migrant integration. In her report on *Supporting Mentors during the Practical Training of Apprentices* Tina Klarič focuses on apprenticeships, which are being conducted as an experiment in vocational education, and where apprentices are learning and training for a specific profession, and on how to methodically support the mentors. Anja Benko's reply, *Adult Education Celebrates Jubilees and Receives Recognition*, is on the award that the Ljubljana Public Education Centre – Cene Štupar received from the Municipality of Ljubljana. Barbara Šteh reviews Adrijana Biba Rebolj's doctoral thesis, *Adjustments for Students with Special Needs in Achieving the Required Academic Standards*, and the final three contributions are book reviews: Klara Kožar Rosulnik focuses on *Inequality, Innovation and Reform in Higher Education: Challenges of Migration and Ageing Populations*, Jurij Ličen tackles *Design Thinking Research: Investigating Design Team Performance*, and finally, Tanja Urbančič reviews *E-Education for a Digital Society*.

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