Reflection on mistakes and the development of professional competence

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Introduction

An important goal of the current workplace learning discourse in educational science is to identify starting points and strategies for effective learning processes that are intermingled with work processes. The research project examines the potential of mistakes and unexpected successes in daily working life. Our basic hypothesis is that reflective dealing with mistakes and unexpected successes can instigate learning processes and positively influence the development of professional expertise in situations and contexts, that lack opportunities for formal learning.

Theoretical Background

Workplace Learning theories describe non-formal and incidental learning processes. With focus on this casual character of learning, we pose two questions:

1. What are incidents, that are, on one hand, a „natural“ part of work contexts and, on the other hand, can trigger learning processes? We investigate mistakes and unexpected successes as such incidents.

2. How can employees exploit the potential of these incidents? Our assumption is that reflective analysis of such incidents promotes learning at the workplace.

Mistakes and unexpected successes are conceptualized as critical events, that provide opportunities for the initiation of reflection processes. Several theoretical models support this assumption, e. g. the model of learning from experience (Kolodner, 1983) and the theory of negative knowledge (Oser, Hascher, Spychiger, 1999).

Unlike learning from failures, learning from unexpected successes has not yet been explicitly described or modelled. Our project seeks to develop an initial model and to explore prerequisites and potentials of learning from unexpected successes.

Reflective learning from experienced episodes is described as an important component of workplace learning (Boud, 1999). Applied to failures and unexpected successes, aspects of reflection are

1. analysis of possible and supposable causes and
2. identification and weighting of consequences for further action.

These gain practical relevance through their
3. inclusion within further action.

Method

Basic research question: Does reflection about mistakes and unexpected successes have a positive influence on the development of professional competence?

The sample of an ongoing study consists of 50 customer consultants from German banks with professional experience between two and 30 years.

Research methodology and procedure

Questionnaires are used to collect data about error orientation and gain subjective, longitudinal measures of professional competence. In terms of the latter, we identified aspects of competence that theorists and practitioners consider as being crucial for yielding subjective, longitudinal measures of professional competence. Several theoretical models support this assumption, e. g. the model of learning from experience (Kolodner, 1983) and the theory of negative knowledge (Oser, Hascher, Spychiger, 1999).

Unlike learning from failures, learning from unexpected successes has not yet been explicitly described or modelled. Our project seeks to develop an initial model and to explore prerequisites and potentials of learning from unexpected successes.

A qualitative case study will be conducted in order
a) to get an objective measure of competence
b) to make the subjects reflect about own actions

Within the case study, subjects are filmed while they encounter a prospect new customer played by a trained actor. After the customer conversation, the subjects reflect about their behaviour:
• First, they are asked to reflect openly about their proceeding within the situation.
• Second, subjects are confronted with an optimal solution of the customer problem which was developed in cooperation with banking experts beforehand. Reflective processes emerge from the comparison between given and own solution.

Data analyses

The recorded case study sessions are transcribed. The gained data allows identification of incidents, that trigger reflection processes and comparison between the extent and quality of reflection of subjects with different degrees of expertise.

Status Quo

A pilot-study (N=10) was conducted in a bank to test if the items within the questionnaires are appropriate for the application in the banking business.

Hence existing surveys do not provide a suitable insight into the error culture in the banking sector, an especially interesting aspect of our pilot study is the initial assessment of the subjects’ error orientations with regard to our intention to make them reflect about own errors in the case studies. The feedback we received on the questionnaires was overall positive.

References

Boud, D. J. (1999). Experience and learning: Reflection at work. Deakin: Deakin University, Faculty of Education.
