



Teaching Conference for
Management Educators

OBTC 2015 at University of La Verne
June 17th – 20th, 2015

Submission Template

SUBMISSION GUIDANCE

- * Remove all identifying properties from this document **
- * All files must be saved in PDF format **
- *Please include ALL supplementary text at the end of this document**
- *Only one document should be submitted**

Submission Template for the 2015 OBTC Teaching Conference for Management Educators

1) Title of Proposal:

What Is Learning and How Does it Occur?: Implications of Workplace Learning Scholarship for Experiential Educators

2) Abstract:

Many who are dedicated to experiential pedagogies consider Kolb's action-reflection cycle, which asks learners to participate in experiences and then reflect on them, to be foundational. But reflection-based conceptualizations of learning have been widely critiqued by workplace learning (WPL) scholars who contend that not all learning is mitigated through reflection and, rather, conceptualize learning as embodied and rooted in the social and material world.

This session introduces WPL theories and discusses their implications. Discussion topics include: Does what is learned change, depending on who is in the class? And, does learning happen differently in the technological age—even when we're not online?

3) Keywords:

Use three or four keywords to describe your session.

Learning theory; experiential learning; workplace learning

4) Format

Activity or exercise

Discussion roundtable (60 minute only)

General discussion session

5) Time Requested:

30 Minutes

60 Minutes (*Roundtables must select 60 minutes*)

90 Minutes

6) Planning Details:

Does your session have any special requirements for space or materials?

No

7) Learning Objectives or Goals for the Session:

What are 2-4 specific learning outcomes that participants will get from your session?

Participants will leave the session:

- Having gained an understanding of different ways to conceptualize learning: through the lens of (1) reflective/cognitive theories, (2) community-of-practice approaches, and (3) sociomaterial theories
- Having considered how conceptualizing learning through different theoretical lenses would influence their teaching
- Having gained new concrete strategies they might use in their classes

8) Management or Teaching Topics:

In the past year, my own exploration of workplace learning (WPL) theories has caused me to question how different conceptualizations of learning might impact my own practice, as an experiential educator within a business school. I am particularly curious about the implications of theories that contend that learning need not be mitigated by reflection in order to occur, since they have caused me to question the degree to which assigning reflective papers serves student learning. Do students need to write reflective papers in order to translate their experiences into learning—or, alternatively, is it I who need the reflective papers, so that I can assess their learning? In other words, I have come to question the degree to which an emphasis on reflection is a product of potentially flawed academic assumptions about what constitutes learning.

I am proposing this session, because I hope that delving into WPL theories will prove as enlightening to others as it has been to me. I also hope to catalyze open-ended conversation around what assumptions we, as educators, hold about what constitutes learning and what the implications might be of calling them into question. Looking toward WPL scholarship can prove particularly interesting to the classroom instructor, because it does not begin with the assumption that the traditional features of academic learning—for example, instructors, classes, and assignments—are necessary preconditions to learning. It thus encourages classroom instructors to think about learning—and, consequently, teaching—in new ways.

Specifically, we will consider three theories of learning: (1) reflective/cognitive theories, (2) community-of-practice approaches, and (3) sociomaterial theories. Although the versions of all three theories that will be presented are rooted in WPL scholarship, we will discuss their implications for classroom instruction.

Reflective/Cognitive Theories

Scholars who adopt reflective/cognitive theories conceptualize learning as something that occurs within the mind of individual learners. This conceptualization suggests that we acquire knowledge, either through absorbing external information and concepts or, as constructivists would contend, through using external stimuli to construct meaning. Sfard (1998) referred to this conceptualization of learning as one of “acquisition,” asserting that it has become so widely accepted within Western society as to seem natural. In her words:

Since the time of Piaget and Vygotski, the growth of knowledge in the process of learning has been analyzed in terms of concept development. Concepts are to be understood as basic units of knowledge that can be accumulated, gradually refined, and combined to form ever richer cognitive structures. The picture is not much different when we talk about the learner as a person who constructs

meaning. This approach, which today seems natural and self-evident, brings to mind the activity of accumulating material goods. (Sfard, 1998, p. 5)

This conceptualization of learning is foundational to scholars like Kolb, who defined learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (1984, p. 38) and Argyris and Schön, who advanced the notions of single-versus double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1992) and of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983).

What is particularly interesting about the reflective/cognitive conceptualization of learning is that it suggests that those instructors who facilitate experiential, participative, and constructivist learning experiences actually conceive of learning in similar terms to those who adopt “sage on the stage” approaches. In both cases, it is the individual, “or more essentially, the individual’s mind, [who is cast] as the hero of the learning story” (Fenwick, Nerland, & Jensen, 2012, p. 5).

Community of Practice Approaches

Community of practice (CoP) approaches, which can be understood as rooted in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) analysis of anthropological studies of how newcomers came to be socialized into established communities, posit that “all learning processes are embedded in social interactions among people and in the context where socializing occurs” (Dochy, Gijbels, Segers, & van den Bossche, 2011, p. 70). For CoP theorists, cognitivists overestimate the degree to which learning is a mental activity and underestimate the degree to which it also involves coming to be and to become (Brandt & Elkjaer, 2011). For CoP theorists, we learn through becoming part of a social community.

This conceptualization of learning raises interesting questions for classroom educators, for one, because it is not clear which community our students are being socialized into, and what our role might be, as instructors, in the socialization/learning process: Might the members of a given class be considered a CoP, and if so, how might we, as instructors, actively nurture it? Or is academia the CoP into which we are socializing students, when we ask them, for example, to format essays using APA citation style? Or, alternatively, is the workplace where students hope to find employment the CoP that we are preparing students to access? Moreover, how do the CoPs that students belong to outside the class—for example, ethnic communities or sports teams—impact learning within it?

Sociomaterial Approaches

Sociomaterialists would critique both cognitivists, for whom learning takes place within the individual’s mind, and CoP theorists, who see learning as happening in a community, for not paying adequate attention to the material world (Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011; Gherardi, 2006). In the eyes of sociomaterialists, our learning always has been mediated by, for example, the arrangement of chairs in the learning space and the

gender and colour of our bodies. For them, the fact that learning could be conceptualized as something that occurred in our minds or through social relationships, within a container of empty space, has always been a fiction. However, in the technological era in which we live, when so much of our lives is mitigated by technology, this fiction can no longer be sustained and the way the social and material are always intermingled has come to the fore, (thus prompting the unhyphenated term sociomaterial) (Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011; Fenwick, Nerland, & Jensen, 2012; Gherardi, 2006; Orlikowski & Scott, 2006).

For classroom instructors, sociomaterial theories ask us to consider the material conditions in which learning occurs. Through its chairs, desks, podiums, whiteboards, as well as its size and shape, the classroom arranges bodies in way that is reflective of how, over time, we, societally, have come to learn to participate in the practice of university-level teaching and learning. Moreover, these theories ask us to consider how new objects—from the cellphones in students’ pockets to the tablets on their desks to our own PowerPoint files, which contain a representation of our curricula—change the what learning is and how it occurs.

9) Session Description and Plan:

Given that all three of the aforementioned theories are grounded in extensive bodies of literature, discussing all of them in a single one-hour session will require that I take a high-level approach. I plan to dedicate five minutes to the introduction of each theory, and distribute handouts with supplementary information, so that the bulk of the session can be dedicated to discussion. That being said, in facilitating the session, I will prioritize meaningful dialogue over “getting through” all of the material outlined in this proposal. For example, if the conversation around CoPs is engaging and participants want to continue with it, I may choose not to address sociomaterial theories. In other words, I will adapt the session, according to the interests of the group.

The session plan is outlined in the following table:

Time	Topic/Activity
10 minutes	<p data-bbox="630 1465 1380 1497">Introduction to the topic, agenda, and those in the room.</p> <p data-bbox="630 1541 1380 1612">Participants will be asked to consider one topic that they hope to teach students in an upcoming class.</p> <p data-bbox="630 1656 1380 1766">In the remainder of the session, these topics will be used to make sense of and play with each of the different theoretical lenses.</p> <p data-bbox="630 1810 1380 1881">I will note upfront that we do not need to “get through” all theoretical lenses. For example, if discussion around CoP</p>

	approaches leads to engaging and worthwhile dialogue, we will not cover sociomaterial theories.
5 minutes	Introduction to reflective/cognitive learning theory
10 minutes	Discussion around the question, "How would you teach the topic that you identified upfront, using a reflective/cognitive lens?"
5 minutes	Introduction to CoP approaches
10 minutes	Discussion around the question, "How would you teach the topic that you identified upfront, using the lens of CoP approaches?"
5 minutes	Introduction to sociomaterial theory
10 minutes	Discussion around the question, "How would you teach the topic that you identified upfront, using the lens of sociomaterial theory?"
5 minutes	Wrap-up and questions

10) For Activities and Exercises:

Attach any materials needed to run the activity and debriefing questions. Evidence for effectiveness may also be included.

11) Implications for Teaching or for Teachers:

What is the contribution of your session?

This session will encourage teachers to question their underlying assumptions about what learning is and how it occurs, as well as consider alternative conceptualizations, with the goal of enabling the imagining of new ways to approach teaching.

12) Application to Conference theme:

How does your session fit with the overall OBTC theme of Learning in Community?

This session fits with the overall theme in two ways. One, through examining learning through the CoP lens, we will question the degree to which community plays a part in student learning. Two, given that this session asks participants to engage in open-ended dialogue, the session itself will ask participants to learn in community.

13) Unique Contribution to OBTC:

Have you presented the work in this proposal before? If so, how will it be different? Is this proposal under current review somewhere else? If so, please explain. How will your proposal be different for the OBTC conference?

This work has not been presented before and is not under review elsewhere.

14) References and/or Additional Materials:

- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1992). *On organizational learning*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Brandi, U., & Elkjaer, B. (2011). Organizational learning viewed from a social learning perspective. In M. Easterby-Smith & M. Lyles (Eds.) *Handbook of organizational learning and knowledge management*, (pp. 23-41). West Sussex, UK: John Wiley and Sons.
- Dochy, F., Gijbels, D., Segers, M., & Van den Bossche, P. (2011). *Theories of learning for the workplace*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fenwick, T., Edwards, R., & Sawchuk, P. (2011). *Emerging approaches to educational research: Tracing the socio-material*. Routledge.
- Fenwick, T., Nerland, M., & Jensen, K. (2012). Sociomaterial approaches to conceptualising professional learning and practice. *Journal of Education and Work*, 25(1), 1-13.
- Gherardi, S. (2006). *Organizational knowledge: The texture of workplace learning*. Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (Vol. 1). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Orlikowski, W. J., & Scott, S. V. (2008). 10 Sociomateriality: Challenging the Separation of Technology, Work and Organization. *The academy of management annals*, 2(1), 433-474.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. USA: Basic Books.
- Sfard, A. (1998). On two metaphors for learning and the dangers of choosing just one. *Educational researcher*, 27(2), 4-13.