Older workers and learning in industrial activities:
When objects and personal senses matter

Abstract

The issue of vocational learning (VL) for older workers (OWs) has become pivotal in European regions with an ageing workforce and facing economic changes and pressure to innovate. European Union policies recognize the value of formal, non-formal and informal learning to enhance workers' skills, but report low participation of OWs in continuing formal VL.

I contend that EU documents conceptualize learning according to a 'cognitivist' view and motivation as an individual endeavour, failing to acknowledge OWs' subjectivities and working activities in providing the context for the development of their motives for learning.

I adopt Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to direct the attention to the OWs' subjectivities and their personal relationships with their objects of activities (work). CHAT allows subjectivities and activities to be brought together in a holistic framework.

To illuminate the different ways in which objects influence motivation and learning, I introduce sociological strategies of production as objects of industrial activities and identify two radically different models as mass production and flexible specialization.

Two case studies, based on unstructured interviews with OWs and managers in two firms representing both production models, provide elements to analyse the interrelation between OWs' activities objects and their personal senses of these.

My thesis concludes that:

(i) OWs' relation with their work contexts, rather than their personal qualities, influences their engagement in their working practices and leads to the development of motives for learning;

(ii) strategies of production influence the intensity and richness of OWs' workplace learning;

(iii) OWs' previous and parallel experiences of active roles contribute to the judgement of the current work and to engagement in this;

(iv) EU policies for VL need to take into account how to support the OWs' engagement in their jobs.