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# The Interplay of Organisational and Individual Bounded Agency in Workplace Learning: A Framework Approach

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## Introduction: Agency in Workplace Learning

The workplace is a vital site of learning during adulthood, allowing for learning experiences rarely available in formal education. Without 'a proper job' available to them, young people miss out on key competences attainable only through workplace learning and cannot complete their professional development.

The features of the workplace shape the opportunities for day-to-day informal learning while at work. Various concepts and measures of the latter have been developed, including the 'learning conduciveness' or

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'learning potential' of workplaces. What type of work you have matters: while some jobs provide ample opportunities for learning, others—in stark contrast—offer hardly any.

What type of workplace is created is largely within the employer's discretion. Organisations' decisions about job design are captured by the term 'organisational agency'. However, as individuals need to apply themselves to turn learning opportunities into learning, individual agency is also important in workplace learning.

In this chapter, we present a research framework on the interplay of 'organisational' and individual agency in workplace learning. The framework has been developed as the underpinning of Enliven's empirical work on early career workers' learning, their employers' organisations, and how workplace learning is the outcome of the interplay of the various parties' agency.

Agency is the core element of our approach. Agency is a frequently used concept for studying individual behaviour, and we use it to understand why individuals take up learning opportunities in different dimensions of their lives over the life course. Agency needs to be understood as a relational concept: actors' choices are bound—enabled and restricted—by their environments. However, we go beyond individual agency, asking about its organisational 'counterpart'. We see an organisation as a specific type of actor with its own agency. Whether workplace learning actually takes place results from the interaction between individual and 'organisational' agency.

Our framework guided work on 17 organisational case studies. Each builds on two rounds of in-depth interviews with about four members of management and four early-career workers. Cases are spread across three economic sectors and nine countries. Key results are presented in Chap. 11 (on Retail in Belgium (Flanders), Denmark and Estonia), Chap. 12 (on the Machinery Sector in Bulgaria and Spain (Basque Region)), and Chap. 13 (Adult Education in Austria, Italy, Slovakia and the UK (England)). Moreover, Chap. 15 applies the approach to observing individual agency over time by reconstructing the evolving life structure. It does this by using three examples where early career workers managed to achieve high levels of workplace learning in unfavourable circumstances.

The current chapter also discusses our cross-country comparative approach and how we explore the significance of societal environments for individual and 'organisational' agency. The framework proposed is rooted in the sociology and political economy of work and research on workplace learning. The latter comprises intentional, non-organised, learning as well as non-intentional ('accidental') learning that occurs while doing one's day-to-day work (the latter often proxied as 'work experience') (Eurostat, 2016; Rogers, 2014).

Analysing the interplay of individual and 'organisational' agency in workplace learning is quite new (Goller & Paloniemi, 2017). By understanding it better, new strategies can be found for overcoming deadlock situations where all actors support workplace learning, but little actually takes place.

We start this chapter by reviewing key concepts developed in the literature on workplace learning, which have informed our approach. Next, we explain how we study the interplay between organisations' agency to create more or fewer opportunities for 'workplace learning' and individual workers' agency to use or refuse the opportunities on offer. We then look at the application of the framework presented in Chaps. 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15, before closing with conclusions and an outlook.

## How Workplaces Can Invite Learning: A Short Review of Concepts

Employees' accounts of poor and rich day-to-day learning at work can be traced back to features of the workplace. How a job is designed determines the learning opportunities available. Whether this design is broad or narrow, whether it is based on a standardised vocational or professional qualification, whether it includes or excludes non-routine activities—all of these make a significant difference. The presence or absence of sources of severe 'distress', such as unhealthy conditions (e.g. hot or noisy production sites), intense work pressure, or an abusive environment, affects whether opportunities are likely to translate into individual learning.

Whether one has access to a 'decent job' with, among many other features (Warhurst et al., 2012), rich opportunities for learning, constitutes a key dimension of social inequality. Jobs which offer few learning opportunities are a source of individual vulnerability. The longer an individual holds a learning-deprived job, the stronger the repercussions are for the individual's skill base and overall well-being; poor learning opportunities at work are detrimental to psychological well-being and functioning in general (Kohn & Schooler, 1983).

Workplace features essential for learning opportunities available are addressed by different approaches. Workplaces are studied for their 'learning potential' (Nijhof & Nieuwenhuis, 2008), their position on a multifaceted continuum of conditions expressing expansive or restrictive learning opportunities (Fuller & Unwin, 2004) or 'learning conduciveness' (Lorenz et al., 2016; Skule, 2004).

The impact of work organisation on the learning conduciveness can be explored by two seminal concepts from the sociology of work, namely the *integration* versus *separation* of routine and non-routine activities (Koike & Inoki, 1990) and the *organisational space* versus *occupational space* framework (Maurice et al., 1986).

In order to pin down the key difference in work organisation in manufacturing between the US and South-East Asia in the 1980s, Koike and Inoki (1990) distinguished workplaces as either 'separating' or 'combining' routine and non-routine activities.

In typical workplaces applying *separation*, the worker is responsible only for routine activities; non-routine activities are the prerogative of technical specialists and managers. For (unskilled or semi-skilled) workers doing routine activities, skill requirements are limited, resulting in lower wage levels. They are told what to do in non-routine situations; they are not expected to work out solutions or to learn from problem-solving activities. For this, specialists with higher levels of skills—and earning higher wages—take over. The separation of non-routine from routine tasks is the hallmark of *Taylorism* and its narrowly defined jobs.

Under the *combination* approach, such as Toyota-style lean management, workers are assigned both routine and non-routine activities, calling for a much broader skill set and a strong preference for teamwork: groups of workers with multiple skills develop and collectively provide

the skill base to run the whole production process. Teams' performance of non-routine activities fosters learning for individual participating workers. High levels of (firm-specific) skills increase individuals' value to the organisation, resulting in long-term (even lifetime) employment relationships.

Compared to separation regimes, average wages are higher, while fewer managers and specialists are needed. Work teams draw their conclusions from non-routine activities, contributing to bottom-up innovation, as captured by Nonaka and Takeuchi's seminal SECI (Socialisation, Externalisation, Combination, Internalisation) model of the 'Knowledge creating company' (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), where individuals' workplace learning translates into organisational learning and innovation.

Whether or not workers are responsible for non-routine activities is therefore a core indicator, representing different logics of how to organise work. The differences between *Taylorist* and more *discretionary* types of work organisation are captured neatly by this one single distinction.

The *separation* versus *combination* divide affects the opportunities for workplace learning in two ways: the learning itself is available from non-routine activities, and whether this learning is likely to be rewarded. With 'separation', ordinary workers are expected to wait patiently for others to overcome a problem; they have no role in or reward from the process. By contrast, with 'combination' the creative solution to the unforeseen event is a rewarded part of everyone's job, enabling the acquisition of tacit knowledge—the foundation of individual expertise and excellence.

The ideas encapsulated in the *separation* versus *combination* paradigm are explored empirically in work on the link between work organisation and innovation based on the European Working Condition Survey (Arundel et al., 2007; Holm & Lorenz, 2013, 2015; Holm et al., 2010; Lorenz et al., 2016; Valeyre et al., 2009). Indicators measuring the problem-solving activities and job discretion (among others) are used to distinguish types of work organisations. Indicators signalling 'combination regimes' are present to a larger extent in workplaces labelled as *discretionary* or *lean* compared to workplaces labelled as Taylorist or *simple*. Economic sectors—and countries as a whole—differ markedly in the prevalence of the four types of workplaces.

Separation versus combination of routine and non-routine is also at the heart of another approach to capturing key differences in work organisation and their effect on learning. Comparing manufacturing plants in Germany and France in the early 1970s, Maurice et al. (1986) fleshed out two sets of arrangements for linking preferred forms of work organisation to (vocational) education systems and social organisation in general.

In places and times where 'organisational space' gained relative dominance, such as France in the 1970s, work is organised according to the organisational preferences of a single firm, limiting the potential role of (broad and standardised) occupations. In the case of France, work was organised along Taylorist lines, with narrowly defined workplaces for the average worker, who—after entering the firm without any specific skill set—was responsible only for routine activities. To complement this, higher proportions of employees in specialist or managerial roles were employed: the non-routine was their prerogative. Strong reliance on firm-specific work organisation limited workers' options to switch employers without substantial losses in skills and pay.

In contrast, in Germany in the 1970s, the principles of the 'occupational space' gained dominance. Work was mainly organised alongside standardised, broadly defined occupations, with the vast majority of workers obtaining full organisational membership only after completing broad and standardised multi-year initial vocational education. In this approach, workers are prepared for broadly defined roles and high levels of individual autonomy as members of multi-skilled work teams. The latter manage daily business and take care of both the routine and the non-routine. There are fewer managers and specialists than in 'organisational space' regimes.

Whether jobs are organised mainly according to organisational needs or occupational patterns is of key importance for several issues related to workplace learning, including the importance of formal adult education (Hefler & Markowitsch, 2012). At a societal level, it helps establish overall expectations about work organisation. In some countries, one of the principles is clearly dominant (e.g. occupational space in Denmark, Austria, Germany or Switzerland; organisational space in the UK and Mediterranean countries). In other countries, neither occupational nor organisational space clearly predominates (e.g. in the Visegrad countries

with their strong vocational streams in upper secondary education). However, in any country, there may be sectors out of line with the dominant pattern. Individual companies may break with the established pattern of their sector or country (see the case of the Danish retailer in Chap. 11) or build up a substitute for the occupational principle when there is no established vocational system (see the Basque cases in Chap. 12).

Whether a particular organisation leans more towards an 'organisational' or an 'occupational' pattern has a strong impact on other aspects of its approach to human resource management and development.

Organisations following an occupational model typically provide demanding, complex workplaces, organised within teams and employing almost exclusively skilled workers or Higher Education graduates. They are likely to be engaged in initial vocational education and training and support formal upskilling, such as craft masters' examinations or their equivalent. Organisations leaning towards 'organisational space' tend to display a much more varied pattern of human resource management and development. They are split between a 'low-skills' road, with large numbers of (at best) semi-skilled workers and a smaller proportion of employees who hold broadly defined, demanding jobs, and a 'high-skills' road. The latter follows the South-Asian model (Koike & Inoki, 1990), where the majority of workers hold complex and demanding jobs. This approach is also captured by the notion of 'high performance' work systems (Appelbaum et al., 2000). These require highly sophisticated internal skill formation programmes, combining off-the-job training with extensive support for informal workplace learning.

In consequence, different patterns of organising work translate into differentiated opportunity structures for individuals, both with regard to workplace learning and in relation to their overall careers. The forms of work organisation shape individuals' choices for further education, as only some forms of individually chosen training pathways pay off. Hence, individuals face very different opportunity structures depending on how employers choose to organise their work.

As individuals react to opportunities provided (individual agency) with the opportunities in place as a result of organisational agency, the interplay between these agencies lies at the centre of our discussion.

# How Organisational and Individual Agency Are Intertwined in Workplace Learning

In this section, we set out the key arguments we use to study the interplay of 'organisational' and individual agency in our empirical work, the results of which are presented in Chaps. 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15.

Organisations enjoy considerable leeway in how to organise work and design jobs. The learning potential of jobs created through organisational decision-making does not, however, automatically translate into individual learning, as individuals must apply themselves if learning is to take place. While organisational decision-making creates an opportunity structure, individual agency is equally important. Therefore, we emphasise both organisational and individual agency (see Fig. 10.1).

We start with the known impact of observable features of the workplace. We emphasise the fact that organisations enjoy considerable leeway in workplace design and have the prerogative to do so—this is part of their 'organisational' agency. They shape the features of the workplace;
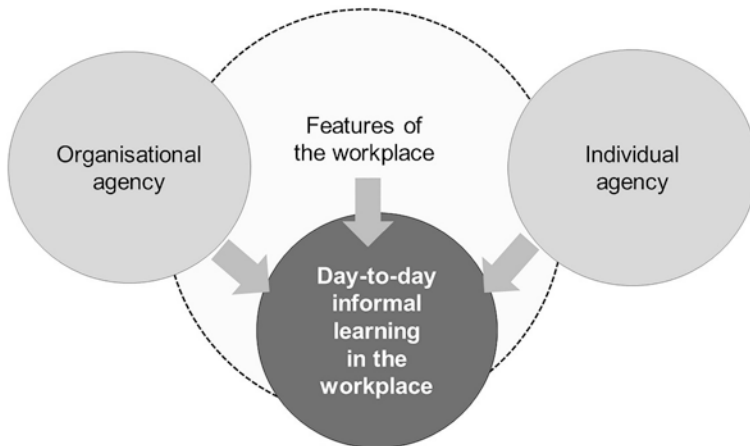


**Fig. 10.1** Informal workplace learning as a negotiated outcome between 'organisational' and individual agency mediated by the features of the workplace. (Source: The authors)

this in turn defines the learning potential available. Organisations may also support workplace learning by their HRM and HRD policies.

We stress equally that learning opportunities do not automatically turn into learning. Individuals must apply themselves. Some individuals overcome poor workplace learning opportunities by finding their own ways of informal learning against the odds, becoming highly knowledgeable and skilled. We therefore allow for individual agency. Overall, we take workplace learning as the intertwined, negotiated outcome of organisational and individual agency. We now discuss our understanding of these two pivotal concepts in detail.

## Organisational Agency in Workplace Learning

By the term *organisational agency*, we refer to an organisation's capacity to make choices which cumulatively generate stark differences between organisations (see Hefler, 2013). These differences can be observed even when organisations offer similar products and services, are of similar size, and work in the same institutional environments. From the perspective of organisational agency, the key questions are why organisations act differently, and how these differences can be traced back to the actions of their members and developments within the organisation over time.

We suggest using *organisational agency* analogously to individual agency, emphasising the choices made by particular organisations. This takes us beyond explanations based on rational behaviour, which assume that—in the aggregate—organisations behave in accordance with their best interests. 'Organisational agency' refers to the room available for forging very different compromises between the conflicting interests of capital and labour and the preferences of groups of members of an organisation.

Our argument is informed by various strands of literature. We refer to organisational institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Greenwood et al., 2017; Scott, 2014; Scott & Davis, 2007), and emphasise organisational perspectives to social stratification. The latter echoes key arguments of the Labour Process debate (Baron, 1984; Thompson & Smith, 2009;

Tomaskovic-Devey, 2014), as well as the Societal Effects school on the political economy of work (Maurice, 2000; Maurice et al., 1986).

Colloquially, we often speak of organisations as 'actors', 'who' are 'doing' 'something', where 'an organisation trains its employees' or 'changes its innovation strategy', or 'announces a mass lay off'. As a 'legal' entity, an organisation makes a taxable profit or is fined for misconduct. As a 'statistical' unit, enterprises of one type (e.g. belonging to one sector) 'behave' (on average) differently from others. Nevertheless, differences in the behaviour of classes of enterprises are typically interpreted not as the result of decision-making processes of single organisations but as reflections of features of their environment (e.g. shortage or abundance of skilled labour).

The term 'organisational agency' is seldom used—and for good reason. A key premise of organisational research is that organisations cannot act on their own accord: individual members act on their behalf; their deeds are attributed to the organisation. The established term *organisational behaviour*—a frequent textbook title (e.g. Robbins and Judge (2018))—refers to the behaviour of individuals as members of, and in roles assigned to them within, organisations, the latter understood as formal structures or legal constructs. It also refers to individuals' observed behaviours in group situations, whether formally arranged or informal.

As a metaphor, organisational agency highlights one cause of variation in organisational behaviour. However, we do not refer to a (reified) super actor but to the intended or unintended outcomes of what an organisation's members do, the latter always rooted both within the organisation and the wider social environment—as captured by the 'natural open systems' perspective (Scott & Davis, 2007). Organisational agency therefore rests on the individual agency of its members.

Members of management have rights and are more powerful than members of non-managerial groups individually. However, all strata of the organisation, and even each individual member, have some power and can leave their mark. Any member may seek support from collective structures within or outside the organisation: for example when technicians liaise with their professional organisations or workers call upon their trade unions. An organisation's agency therefore rests on the

shoulders of its members and represents the outcome of the complex interplay of their drives and struggles.

*Organisational agency* thereby captures both the current struggles of its members and the outcomes of these struggles over time; the latter become imprinted into the formal structures of the organisation, thereby further enabling or constraining the current behaviour of member groups. It equally determines how members of an organisation expect an organisation to develop: current action taken is therefore tainted by the 'shadow of the future'. What—metaphorically speaking—an organisation can do in the present is shaped both by what the organisation has done in the past and by what its members see as its possible futures.

What members of the organisations do and can do—and thus organisational agency—is bounded by its essential environment: its *organisational field* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As an open system, organisations respond to their environment in more or less active ways. As with individuals, their agency is influenced by the constraints and expectations of their environments and the 'building blocks' offered for responding to them in acceptable ways. Environmental factors, as present in a particular organisational field, explain much of the similarity between organisations' formal features and help explain why organisations are similar. However, the environment also needs to be understood as providing a 'menu of choices' which allows for doing things differently—even though choices emerge from strategic decision-making or are unintended outcomes of conflicts that need to be resolved.

## Individual Agency in Workplace Learning

Some individuals act and achieve much as a result of their 'action'; others in a similar structural position either do not 'act' at all or achieve less. Applying this to workplace learning, we see some individuals seizing opportunities while others do not. Why? What does it take for a person to take advantage of what is offered? How does an individual respond to a lack of such offers? Why do some individuals break the mould and succeed under conditions which most people in the same position find

limiting? Our explanation starts with the social structures which enable and limit individual agency; we then turn to individual agency itself.

Following Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and Evans (2007), we take agency as a fundamentally *relational* concept, meaning that individual opportunities to act are constituted—enabled and limited—by the *totality* of social relations, conceptualised as a (Bourdieusian) *social space* with individual positions defined as holding more or less power over others in the same space. In liberal democracies with comprehensive welfare states, even lower-tier social positions offer considerable leeway for applying agency. However, a broad range of opportunities are—in a foreseeable, regular way—accessible only for individuals in more privileged positions, while those in less favourable positions are practically excluded from the same opportunities (unless the 'big lottery of life' plays a part). In short, *opportunity structures*, defined (echoing Robert Merton) as 'the options of individual choice, determined by structural and institutional properties of the societies, open for individuals in a particular social place within [its] society' (Hefler, 2013, pp. 176–177), differ sharply across positions in the social space.

The leeway available for applying one's agency is therefore constituted by the power differentials within the social space and is larger for those in privileged positions. The differences between positions can be expressed in various ways. Bourdieu (1986), for example argues for a particular blend and volume of various sorts of 'capital'—economic, social, cultural—with educational credentials expressing some of the last; the value of capital given is, however, strictly relative. One is 'poor' or 'rich' only in relation to others.

Social institutions of all kinds materialise into the *class structure* of the social space and are experienced by individuals as *enablers* of or *barriers* to any undertaking. Forms of discrimination—by gender, race, religion, social origin, citizenship and others—are inscribed and institutionalised within the social space, putting individuals at an advantage or disadvantage. Individuals are socialised into the expectations linked to their social position; they may experience a taste of power when reaching out for opportunities not meant for them. They may exert their agency by fighting uphill battles—and may even succeed. Finally, as social institutions structuring the social space reflect the outcomes of past social struggles,

the space needs to be understood as malleable by collective action: this can weaken limitations on social positions (e.g. for women) or establish new ones (e.g. for non-citizens).

While social space and opportunity structures set the stage, how does individual agency enter the scene? With Emirbayer and Mische (1998), we focus on how individuals act and apply their agency by relating both to domains and to time—by accommodating to the social domains, an individual takes part in while simultaneously relating this to different temporal modes, past, future, and present. We study how early-career workers integrate their workplace learning behaviour with their striving in other parts of their lives and how they make sense of their past experiences and anticipated futures when applying themselves in the present.

> Actors are always living simultaneously in the past, future, and present and adjusting their various temporalities of their empirical existence to one another (and to their empirical circumstance) in more or less imaginative or reflective ways. They continuously engage patterns and repertoires from the past, project hypothetical pathways forward in time, and adjust their actions to the exigencies of emerging situations. Moreover, there are times and places when actors are more oriented toward the past, more directive toward the future, or more evaluative of the present; actors may switch thereby changing their degrees of flexible, inventive, and critical response toward structuring contexts. Such a perspective lays the basis for a richer and more dynamic understanding of the capacity that actors have to mediate the structuring contexts within which action unfolds. (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 1012)

Agency thus appears as a reflective practice in which individuals engage, more or less skilfully, and by which they can generate different outcomes under similar circumstances. Agency resonates here with Bourdieu's concept of practice, where actors are invested in a game and play it as best they can supported and limited by internalised dispositions (*habitus*); the rules and strategies of the same game characterise the given condition in a social field (Bourdieu, 1990). Both are crucial, in that an individual can become invested in the social games at hand and can make achievements which go beyond, or fall short of, what their starting

position might suggest. While social inequality imprints the outcomes of the games individuals take part in, how individuals apply their agency still makes a difference—in particular when we compare the outcomes achieved by players from similar starting positions.

When agency is made the object of research, patterns of agency characterising individuals' behaviour with considerable independence from social structures emerge. As a guiding example, we refer here to Evans and Heinz's proposal for a typology of patterns of individual transitions behaviour in school-to-work transitions, representing a dominant mode of agency, at least with regard to career choices (Evans & Heinz, 1994). They identify a 'strategic' pattern, a 'step by step' approach, a 'taking chances' pattern, or a 'wait and see' attitude as underpinning career transitions, and while the frequency of single patterns of agency obviously varies with the opportunity structures available, the various patterns can be found within groups of young people starting from very similar social positions.

We now explain how we have applied the conceptualisation of individual agency to workplace learning. For workplace learning, the immediate opportunity structures are defined by the features of the workplace; however, individuals' agency—the games they play—is characterised by how they relate the domains of work to their other life domains: relationships, family, communities, civic engagement, and leisure. Moreover, we see how individuals make sense of their past experiences and expected futures and how this informs their engagement with workplace learning.

We are interested in individual agency in workplace learning: how individuals apply themselves to opportunities for learning present at work. A full account will involve how (a) an individual turns opportunities at hand into learning and (b) responds to a lack of learning available by coming to a standstill in related domains of learning. We are equally interested in more unexpected cases, where individuals (c) find ways to learn in workplaces which restrict opportunities for learning or (d) refrain from learning at work, although opportunities to do so abound.

We observe agency in workplace learning by focussing on:

- Learning in the initial phases of work engagement, where responding to and surviving despite a job's immediate demands is the dominant theme
- Continuous learning in day-to-day work after the saturation point of the initial learning processes upon entry to work, irrespective of whether the latter has taken a few days or a number of years
- Individual learning from non-routine activities, in particular, where non-routine activities are explicitly covered by individuals' job descriptions (non-separation of routine and non-routine) (Koike & Inoki, 1990)
- Learning from various approaches implemented with the intention of supporting workplace learning, such as workshops, quality circles, or job rotation
- Learning from non-formal courses directly linked to the current workplace

We understand agency in day-to-day learning at work as the outflow of individual agency in general, the latter being applied in shaping individuals' life course development (Evans, 2007). We expect individuals to perceive learning opportunities in the workplace in the light of the availability or absence of institutionalised options on offer. They may respond to available life choices differently, depending on how they experience learning opportunities at work.

In particular, we are interested in:

- The options at play for earning and enjoying organisational membership, resulting in the development of an identity as a member of a particular organisation
- The patterns available for becoming a member of an occupation and taking part in an occupation's identity
- The ways in which day-to-day learning in the workplace is inscribed in well-established, institutionalised career pathways within the organisation (*job ladders*) or in *educational ladders*, leading to upward educational mobility. Alternatively, the presence of unstructured but visible ways for making progress—e.g. with new positions created in an

expanding organisation—which appear to be developmental opportunities
- The patterns available for making good use of lessons learnt in the workplace in accessible career pathways, providing a way out of the current job trajectory

Finally, we understand agency in day-to-day workplace learning as a reflection of the individual's evolving life structure. The latter has a strong influence, regardless of whether the current position and the learning available are rated as fully desirable, an acceptable valid compromise for the time being, or an unwelcome point from which one needs to escape. Agency in workplace learning thereby reflects varied attempts to reconcile one's life domains.

For observing life domains, we refer to the concept of *life structure* (Levinson, 1980). We observe individuals' evolving life structures over time, focussing on how they relate their gainful *work* with intimate relationships and family obligations (*love*), self-care, recreation and leisure time activities, civic engagement, and—as one form of the temporal components of the life structure—participation in organised non-formal or formal education. Beyond *work* and *love*—central components which shape various phases of one's life structure—the constant modification of (so-called) peripheral components (such as leisure or participation in social movements) may significantly alter the overall pattern. Finally, unfilled components in one's life structure may become highly influential: 'A person urgently wants but does not have a meaningful occupation, a marriage, a family; and this absent component plays a major part in the life structure' (Levinson & Levinson, 1996, p. 23). Levinson's concept of the life structure, incorporating adult development as a socio-psychological entity, is closely related to the sociological concept of agency, as it aims to overcome unproductive dichotomies between the 'inner' versus the 'outer' world: 'the individual psychological' versus the 'social' (Hefler, 2013, p. 111). 'Theoretically, the life structure forms a bridge between personality structure and social structure' (Levinson, 1980, p. 288):

> To be truly engaged with the world, one must invest important parts of the self in it and, equally, must take the world into the self and be enriched,

depleted, and corrupted by it. In countless ways, we put ourselves into the world and take the world into ourselves. Adult development is the story of the evolving process of mutual interpenetration of self and world. (Levinson, 1980, p. 278)

To sum up, we conceptualise agency in workplace learning as an individual's activity in accommodating social domains (the workplace as part of his/her overall life structure) and temporalities (the past, the future) in present-moment decisions. As a relational term, agency refers to a social space, its particular social fields, and its power differentials; these provide individuals with different initial 'opportunity structures'. The concept of agency prepares us for encountering highly diverse outcomes with regard to workplace learning under similar structural conditions (e.g. the same type of workplace within the same organisation). We argue that these diversities of outcomes can be explored and understood against the backdrop of an individual's overall life course development. In Chap. 15, we show how we have applied this framework.

## The Framework Summarised and an Outlook on the Empirical Results

In this section, we summarise the key arguments underpinning the empirical work which is presented in Chaps. 11, 12, and 13. Figure 10.2 brings together our argument about how *organisational* and *individual* agency come together in shaping day-to-day workplace learning. The key proposition is that workplace learning is the negotiated outcome of organisational and individual agency with features of the workplace shaping the *opportunity structure* in place.

Organisations enjoy considerable leeway in designing workplaces; they apply their agency when designing jobs in the first place. They make decisions about the overall work organisation in which single jobs are embedded. They define the overall distribution of jobs with more or less favourable features, including autonomy, power, security of tenure, and pay, and they define the routes available for moving up the ladder from less to more favourable jobs. Organisational choices inform their HRD
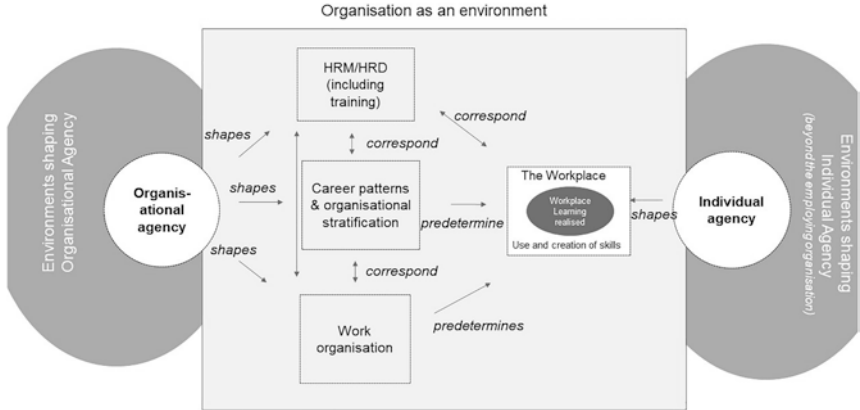
**Fig. 10.2** Map of the key line of arguments linking the elements of the study. (Source: Authors' development)

strategies and their offer of corporate training in particular. The various ways in which organisations apply their agency to shape workplaces show how powerful organisations actually are—compared to individual workers—in shaping workplace learning.

Nevertheless, organisations' behaviour with regard to workplace learning, job design and work organisation is far from unrestricted. Organisational agency is bounded—enabled and restricted—by features of the environment. The latter can be seen as the organisational field to which an organisation belongs: organisations define and justify their own ways of doing things against the backdrop of what other organisations in the same organisational field do. Organisational fields are permeated by the societal effects of the particular society (e.g. the organisation of the education system, the institutions governing employment and industrial relations) as well as by transnational fields (such as the opportunities available for off-shoring or entering distant markets).

While the learning potential of a single workplace is mainly shaped by organisational decision-making, whether or not workplace learning actually takes place also depends on individual agency. Individual agency contributes to the shaping of workplaces themselves, as workplaces over time may change in line with what job holders do and what they succeed in learning. Individual agency itself is seen as rooted not in the workplace

alone but in an individual's evolving life structure: this can be captured by appropriate frameworks. As with organisational agency, societal level institutions and their effects on the individual opportunity structures imprint themselves strongly on individual agency and one's evolving life structure. In Chap. 15, we demonstrate our approach to observing an individual's evolving life structure in order to achieve a better understanding of agency in workplace learning.

The conceptual framework outlined in this chapter has been applied to studying the workplace learning of 71 individuals in early career stages working for one of 17 organisations studied in detail. Our depiction of 'organisational agency' is based on an overview of the characteristics of the various forms of work organisation across the sample. We consider three key factors: first, whether the job content is defined in a more restricted or deliberately broader way; second, whether for the typical job a specific vocational or professional qualification is required; and finally, whether job design typically opts for combining or separating routine from non-routine activities.

The sectors and types of organisations were selected to allow for observing different approaches to work organisation and job design. For selected types of enterprises in the retail sector—major retailers for daily necessities with more than 1000 employees—we expected to find a mainly Tayloristic work organisation with narrowly defined entrance-level jobs for shop floor workers. For the machinery sector, we expected to find a variety of forms of work organisations resulting in jobs with high and low learning potential. For the adult learning sector, and our preference for studying teachers in particular, we expected to find chiefly learning-rich jobs organised according to patterns typical of professional work.

As we show in Chap. 11, the five organisations in retail studied confirmed our expectations and our grounds for selecting the retail sector: all five organisations studied provide, for early-career job assistants, mainly narrowly defined jobs, with limited opportunities for learning from non-routine activities. Only by various kinds of job rotation between similar jobs can a broader range of skills be applied in day-to-day work. More learning in the workplace is available only to those early-career workers selected for managerial career pathways or specialised roles.

In the metal sector, explored in Chap. 12, a clear distinction emerged between the two Basque workplaces—with rich learning opportunities—and the two studied Bulgarian companies, where we found comparatively poor learning opportunities. The learning-conducive workplaces clearly elicited high levels of motivation to learn among early-career workers, allowing them to embrace their workplace and permanent organisational membership as a part of their emerging identities. However, the high demands at work also took a toll, moving gainful work into the centre of their emerging life structures and, leaving little space for anything else, called for postponement of other important tasks.

The two Bulgarian workplaces allowed—after a more prolonged induction phase—limited space for day-to-day learning. However, in a low-wage country and in regions with poor employment opportunities, especially for highly qualified young people, routinised factory work was sweetened by above-average wages. Finally, early-career workers could benefit to some degree from the rapid growth and economic success of the two factories, with new job positions being created. In growing organisations, early-career workers may find opportunities for career advancement even without formally ascribed pathways. And in a relatively well-paid job and with a degree of job security, early-career workers could focus on other important aspects of their lives.

Teaching in adult education typically allows for rich day-to-day workplace learning—a pattern common in professional work organisations, where individuals are responsible for all tasks, routine and non-routine. During the early periods, the demands of the job often seem overwhelming. Novice teachers face a steep learning curve and need levels of personal commitment far beyond their paid working hours. The teachers reported that it had taken 2–4 years to feel confident with all aspects of their job, although there was a broad agreement that opportunities for further informal learning are practically unlimited, with new tasks and challenges becoming visible with each year of practice. As a (para-) profession, adult education also provides a stable base for forming one's identity.

While the nature of professional work clearly favours workplace learning, poor employment conditions, low levels of pay, and organisational support often limit early-career workers' opportunities to stay in the field.

In order to enjoy work with rich opportunities for learning and individual development, early-career workers must give their profession an important role in their overall life structure and accept employment conditions and income below the average for many other teaching professions. This pattern emerged across organisations and countries. Better opportunities were provided only in organisations where teaching was combined with more managerial tasks. Nevertheless, for many early-career workers, improving their employment and income position meant, in the long run, leaving adult education.

## Conclusions

In terms of lifelong learning policy, the features of the workplace matter: they shape the opportunity structures for people's learning at work. An individual may look for a more learning-conducive job or try to overcome poor learning opportunities at work in other areas of his/her life structure. Policies can promote meaningful learning opportunities not connected to the world of gainful work. But the limitations set by workplaces offering poor learning are a key barrier to making lifelong learning a reality for all.

Organisations are the gatekeepers to lifelong learning. This is partly because they provide job-related non-formal education—or do not. Yet their role in providing learning-conducive work is even more important: how they divide up the work required, with jobs or sequences of jobs, either providing or denying rich opportunities for learning and development. Organisational behaviour determines the overall composition of available workplaces (as either learning-rich or learning-poor), and thereby the available opportunity structures for learning. And while the availability of day-to-day learning opportunities is only one dimension of job quality, it is typically associated with other criteria of a 'decent job'.

In order to immerse themselves in opportunities for workplace learning, early-career workers need to develop an idea about their futures which informs their agency in the present. They need to trust that today's learning will be meaningful in the light of promises made by their current organisation or by such social institutions as occupations and professions.

The latter allow them to identify as skilled or expert workers in a field, even without support from their current employer. They also need to be able to embrace learning as a way of moving out of a limiting or unpleasant job.

As with job design, lifelong learning policy finds it hard to embrace the structuration of early career pathways. While it is widely accepted that motivation to learn calls for expectation that learning will have positive consequences, this has had little impact on workplace learning policy. Lifelong learning policy is ill-equipped to ask enterprises for more comprehensive or fairer structuring of early career opportunities. The role of occupations and professions in providing orientation to a person's learning pathway is still hardly grasped, especially in lifelong learning policies that go beyond the provision of vocational or professional education.

With some exceptions shown in Chaps. 11, 12, and 13, no organisation studied included early-career workers in innovation activities or paid attention to how a new entrant might contribute to its capacity to absorb innovation. Where narrowly defined workplaces dominate or professional activities are isolated from managerial decision-making, organisations can profit little from the potential that early-career workers offer for driving organisational innovation.

Here a vicious circle can be observed. Narrowly defined jobs restrict learning, limiting early-career workers' opportunities to contribute to organisational innovation, other than by mutely accepting new rules to implement top-down innovations. Being thus marginalised, early-career workers have little chance to contribute; they may even be seen as a barrier to successful implementation, calling for still more regulation and control.

For lifelong learning policy, this means it is crucial to revitalise links to innovation studies and approaches to organisational learning in particular. Learning needs to be seen not only as the acquisition of established knowledge, nor simply as socialisation into professional roles and communities, but also as innovation. When it comes to innovation, lifelong learning policy is far too often caught up in chimeras about 'cutting edge' content or 'novel' methodologies. It should return to the question of how workplaces can be shaped to allow workers an active role in the processes underpinning innovation.

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