

Critical Discursive Psychology of Informal Learning in an SME Coworking Space in Kuwait

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to explore informal learning practices among full-time office personnel at an SME coworking space in Kuwait and the ways in which they acquire new skills and knowledge. Using a critical discursive psychological approach, data collected through three semi-structured interviews were analyzed. The findings reveal the existence of four distinct interpretive repertoires of informal learning, each with its own unique characteristics, purpose and individual's role within the organization. Additionally, the research illustrates how the unique characteristics of the coworking industry and the SME context in Kuwait shape these informal learning practices. This research fills a gap in knowledge on informal learning in SMEs and specifically addresses the limited research on this topic in an international setting, providing valuable insights for businesses, policymakers, and researchers alike.

Keywords: human resource development; informal learning; small and medium-sized enterprise; identity

JEL Classification: M12; M13; M50

1. Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are numerically a strong segment of the economy and dominant contributors to employment across countries at different stages of development, and as such, account for a substantial part of the workplace-learning context (OECD, 2017; Coetzer, Wallo, & Kock, 2019; Coetzer, Kock, & Wallo, 2017). In Kuwait, it is estimated that SMEs make up about 90% of the total number of privately held companies (MARKAZ, 2020). The benefits of informal learning for both organizations and individuals are widely acknowledged in human resource development (HRD) literature, with research showing its positive impact on organizational performance, competitiveness, and employee productivity and employability (Atkinson, Lupton, Kynighou, & Antcliff, 2021; Susomrith & Coetzer, 2019; Zuo, Fisher, & Yang, 2019; Zhang & Edgar, 2021; Donohue & Tham, 2019; Jeong, McLean, & Park, 2018).

Informal learning encompasses a wide range of practices that occur outside of formal classroom or structured learning environments (Marisck & Watkins, 1990). According to Kim & McLean (2014), major factors that influence informal learning can be categorised into three levels: individual, peer-to-peer, organisational and environmental. Individual level factors include trial-and-error and self-directed learning, where individuals identify their own

learning goals, methods, and resources (Lemmetty & Collin, 2020). Peer-to-peer level includes, for example, coaching and mentoring (Mentz & Zyl, 2018; Wolff, Stojan, Buckler, Cranford, Whitman, Gruppen, & Santen, 2019). Organisational/environmental level factors include HR systems (Kim & McLean, 2014). While informal learning has the potential to increase autonomy (Lemmetty & Collin, 2020), it is also shaped by contextual factors such as industry discourses, and social constructions of meaning (Garrick, 1998). Understanding how informal learning is influenced by these contextual factors can help to comprehend the complexity of workplace learning in a specific environment.

Although informal learning has been widely studied (e.g. Crans, Bude, Beusaert, & Segers; 2021; Marsick & Watkins, 1990), there is a lack of research on this topic in the context of SMEs (Coetzer et al., 2017; Coetzer et al., 2019; Jeong et al., 2018), particularly in international settings where individuals of different national origins may have different reactions to management practices in these organizations (Kim & McLean, 2014; Jeong et al., 2018). The HRD literature on workplace learning is primarily based on research in large organizations, leaving a gap in our understanding of learning practices in SMEs (Coetzer et al., 2017; Coetzer et al., 2019). However, SMEs have distinct learning needs and resources and often challenges such as financial constraints, limited managerial capacity, high levels of procedural informality, and a lack of human resources that can impact effective learning initiatives (Coetzer et al., 2017; Coetzer et al., 2019; Psychogios et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important to examine SMEs' specific learning practices, in order to understand how they can effectively support the learning and development of their personnel.

This study aims to explore informal learning among personnel in an SME coworking space in Kuwait. Coworking spaces provide office space, and shared administrative and support services to SMEs, freelancers, and other independent professionals (Orel & Dvoulety, 2020), and foster peer collaboration and skills exchange, creating opportunities for informal learning through the creation of ready-made communities of practice (Bilandzic, Schroeter, & Foth, 2013). In Kuwait, coworking spaces have gained popularity as a solution to the increasing cost of office space. Although earlier research on coworking spaces focused the role of human talent (Orel, Mayerhoffer, & Fratricova, 2022) and knowledge exchange processes among users (Bouncken & Aslam, 2019), studies on the topic of personnel workplace learning in these hybrid spaces (Orel & Dvoulety, 2020) are scarce.

To address this gap, this study employs critical discursive psychology (CDP), a prominent approach from within the broad disciplinary area of discourse analysis (Taylor, 2001). CDP allows researchers to examine the situated nature of language use (Garrick, 1998). This is particularly relevant for studying informal learning in a coworking SME in Kuwait, as it allows researchers to understand how the cultural and social context of the organization shapes learning practices. Overall, CDP offers a rich approach for studying informal learning in SMEs in Kuwait, allowing researchers to examine the situated nature of language use (Garrick, 1998) and the discursive resources that individuals utilize when constructing their views and identities (Horton-Salway, 2007).

Thus, the study asks: How do employees of an SME coworking space in Kuwait describe the practice of informal learning?

This study aims to deepen our understanding of HRD in SMEs and provide valuable insights for practitioners looking to facilitate informal learning.

2. Methodology

This research adopts a post-structuralist perspective and asserts that knowledge is positioned, incomplete, and comparative (Taylor, 2001). These epistemological claims are particularly relevant in the context of qualitative research (Holloway, 2007). From a post-structuralist perspective, it is important to examine the modes of speech and discourses that individuals use to construct their views in the context of workplace learning research (Lemmetty & Collin, 2020). Using self-narratives can provide insight into the culturally accessible repertoires that individuals utilize when discussing workplace learning. According to Rhodes and Brown (2005), the investigation and analysis of narratives that participants create about their groups, departments, and organizations can lead to a more nuanced understanding of working lives. By altering the direction of certain narratives, a positive outcome in an employment relationship can be achieved (Conway & Briner, 2005).

The purpose of this research was to explore the different ways of talking about informal learning that are employed in order to increase understanding of the various aspects and nature of workplace learning in SMEs. CDP, which focuses on the way language is used to construct social reality, can be used to examine the action orientation of talk (Taylor, 2001; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001). It combines insights from post-structuralist and Foucauldian-influenced notions of discourse with those from the ethnomethodological/conversation tradition (Wetherell, 1998). This allows for both a top-down view, paying attention to discourse resources and how widely accepted cultural representations impact the expression of assertions, and a bottom-up perspective, focusing on discourse processes and how language constructs social order (Wetherell, 1998).

2.1. Research Context

The study was conducted at a profit-based coworking space provider, named Nomad (pseudonym), located in Kuwait. Founded in 2018, Nomad is a leading coworking space provider in Kuwait and is considered an SME with 0-249 employees and an annual turnover of less than 5 million Kuwaiti Dinars (UNDP, 2011). To ensure its continued economic sustainability, Nomad established an incubation program within its coworking space to support small businesses at different stages of development, expanding both its network and that of the small businesses.

This study conducted three semi-structured interviews with full-time office personnel. The choice to focus on full-time employees was made as they are more likely to be fully integrated into the organization's social system (Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003), compared to other employees, like baristas, mandoob (delegate), and external

mentors/coaches. The management of human resources is shared by the owner-manager and accountant/HR executive, and centers primarily on legal and payroll matters respectively. The 60-minute interviews were conducted in November 2021, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed, and the participants were proficient in English. To protect anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used. The researcher familiarized herself with the organization by visiting the participating firm prior to conducting the interviews and observing the daily activities of the personnel. The interviews focused on workplace learning and competence development, with questions such as ‘Can you share your opinion on learning in the workplace?’, ‘How do you go about improving your skills and abilities at work?’, and ‘How does your employer support the development of your competencies in the workplace?’ Table 1 provides an overview of the participant characteristics employed in this study.

Table 1. Interviewees of the study

Alias	Primary job role	Years with Nomad	Education level	Age
Fatmah	Community coordinator	2 years	Bachelor’s degree	24
Abdullah	SME specialist	2 years	Bachelor’s degree	27
Vimal	Accountant/HR Executive	2 years	Bachelor’s degree	26

2.2. Analysis

The current study used critical discursive psychological methods and tools to uncover patterns in the sample. The analysis was guided by three key concepts in CDP: interpretative repertoires, subject positions, and ideological dilemmas (Edley, 2001). *Interpretative repertoires* are concerned with discourse processes (Horton-Salway, 2007). They have been described as a register of terms, figures of speech (tropes), and metaphors that help evaluate events and actions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Edley (2001, p.198) described interpretive repertoires as ‘the building blocks of conversation’. *Subject positions*, or ways of being, represent culturally accessible kinds (discourse resources) that characterize individuals and their identities (Horton-Salway, 2007). From this top-down perspective, subject positions are already present in discourse but can change in relation to historical and cultural circumstances (Horton-Salway, 2007). Social identities are therefore to some extent characterized by the prior discourses (and accessible subject positions) of contemporary cultures (Horton-Salway, 2007). Workplaces are a site for the circulation of multiple discourses, which generate different subject positions and ways of being (Harman, 2011). In this sense, identities are flexible and in process (Horton-Salway, 2007). Subject positions link the concept of interpretative repertoires to the social construction of specific identities (Edley, 2001). Finally, since shared understanding is full of counter-arguments, daily discourse can be ‘*dilemmatic*’ (Billig et al., 1988, p. 22).

3. Results

In this study, I identified four interpretive repertoires with distinct perspectives on informal learning, individual roles, and the learning environment. Participants adopted different, and sometimes contradictory, subject positions and navigated various ideological dilemmas, which were shaped by a range of factors, including the participant's personal experiences, organizational culture, and the broader discourses of the coworking industry.

Next, I will provide an overview of these four interpretive repertoires, subject position and ideological dilemmas, highlighting the key characteristics of each and the ways in which they shape our understanding of informal learning in the workplace. These perspectives are not exhaustive and are meant to provide a general understanding of the findings of the study.

3.1. Interpretative Repertoires, Subject Positions and Ideological Dilemmas

At Nomad, formal training is not a dominant discursive resource of the company and learning was primarily self-initiated. However, participants rely (at times) on various informal learning discursive resources to support their informal learning process.

Fast-paced and flexible practice. At Nomad, the fast and flexible learning repertoire reflects the dynamic nature of SMEs and coworking industry in Kuwait, as well as Kuwait's competitive landscape. This repertoire involves juggling a broad range of work responsibilities and managing several tasks efficiently, with the customer and his or her needs playing a central role in the interpretative repertoire. Phrases that suggested shared repertoires around this topic included 'haste', 'little time to think', and 'customer requirements'. Participants adopted the subject position of a flexible learner constructing flexibility as an organizational requirement and an internalized quality (Lindell, Popover & Uhlin, 2022), as is seen in the following fragment:

Fatmah: With this position, it always makes me feel like I'm in a hurry. Because I handle a lot, I try to learn things quickly because new things are going to come.

This involves the ability to rapidly adapt and respond to the fast-paced work environment by being open to learning new skills to meet the demands of the job. The learning process in this context often happens spontaneously as a response to a new task or situation, but the lack of clear organizational structures, such as policies and rules, can hinder employees' learning opportunities. The absence of these structures can result in a reactive approach to learning (Watkins & Marsick, 1992) where individuals are only able to manage challenges they face in their daily work.

An ideological dilemma in the fast-paced and flexible learning repertoire at Nomad is the tension between the benefits of flexibility for employees and the lack of structure (Lindell et al., 2022), which is seen in the following fragment:

Abdullah: I think in my day-to-day activities are stopping me from reaching their (note by the author: international incubators or business accelerators from 500 Startups) standards because I'm busy with day-to-day work ... so I'm focused on getting things done on a daily basis... Because of business on this side I'm not able to reach their way of work.

A post-structuralist reading suggests that the idea of 'becoming more flexible' in a fast-paced business environment might be a subtle way of asking employees to take on more responsibilities without receiving any extra pay (Garrick, 1998).

Learning as entrepreneurial practice. The coworking space at Nomad, with its distinct entrepreneurial atmosphere, fostered a discourse of entrepreneurship (Ivanova & von Scheve, 2019) that encouraged participants to undertake new and challenging activities such as organizing seminars and participating in the creation of programs for Nomad's clients. The interpretative repertoire around entrepreneurship is positively oriented, with all respondents viewing change as offering opportunities for creativity and growth. Indeed, the terms employed in this repertoire suggested the notion of progress, from 'proactive' to 'improvement'. This is evident in the following fragment:

Abdullah: Being part of the program was a huge learning experience for me... things I haven't even learned in university.

This discourse positioned employees as enterprising selves (Fournier, 1998) and active agents in their own learning process. This can be seen in the following fragments:

Abdullah: If there's something that can add value to me, I definitely do it.

Fatmah: I want to be a better person in everything. Here, everyone is a manager for himself.

The findings indicate that the sense of empowerment among employees at Nomad is shaped by their relationships with the owner-manager (Grieves, 2003), who often 'pushes' (Vimal) them to strive for more. This entrepreneurial discourse aims to give workers greater decision-making responsibility (Mir & Mir, 2005), in exchange for their cooperation (Garrick, 1998). As a result, employees are expected to self-manage their work and time (Ivanova & von Scheve, 2019).

However, this practice also presents an ideological dilemma, balancing the benefits of empowerment and autonomy as an enterprising self (Fournier, 1998) and avoiding overburdening of employees (Garrick, 1998). The following fragment indicates realisation that although Nomad proves an excellent learning opportunity, it is profit-driven and 'lean', which leaves Vimal overburdened with excessive workload:

Vimal: I think that's the thing with startups... you get so many positions that you get to learn everything... And... there are side effects. Like getting exhausted. Tasks you couldn't finish.

Learning as collaborative practice. The learning as collaborative practice emphasizes close working relationships, the close-knit and supportive atmosphere, and the sharing of knowledge, all of which motivate employees to engage in continuous learning. Collaborating with colleagues and other companies on important projects was mentioned as a way for participants to learn:

Abdullah: We work as a team, especially when we're facing a problem and we usually meet up to do it. And we also do it with other companies. Nomad has a program, which we do once a year, it's called xxxx program (name of the program removed by the author to maintain company's anonymity) where we develop different businesses. During this program we do group work, we kind of exchange knowledge with each other.

The subject position of collaborator was adopted by the participants at Nomad through their close working relationships with their colleagues to share ideas, best practices, and work on

challenging projects. This collaborative approach to learning enabled the employees to overcome disciplinary barriers, solve problems and work more efficiently on challenging projects. These learning activities, characterized by mutual exchanges, frequently take place on a group level and involve activities such as sharing knowledge, debriefing, and exchanging feedback.

However, an ideological dilemma arises when considering the potential tension between the benefits of collaboration, such as innovation (Mentz & Zyl, 2018), and the use of 'family' discourse used to shape behavior through loyalty appeals (Garrick, 1998), potentially compromising the autonomy of employees (Garrick, 1998).

Practice tied to networking. Another linguistic repertoire present was in reference to networking. This repertoire included the *internal network*, which included colleagues and the owner-manager. The participants' repertoires connected networking with 'interaction', 'exchanging', and 'personal and professional growth'. Participants' adoption of the learner subject position, however, was contingent on the status of the person they were seeking expertise from. From within the internal network, they were more likely to seek information or help from individuals with higher status, such as the owner-manager or more experienced colleagues, which is seen in the following fragment:

Abdullah: The person I'm learning the most from is Mustafa (note by the author: the owner-manager) because of the way he thinks. He doesn't think locally, he thinks internationally.

Similarly, Fatmah narrates that the person she mostly learns from is the owner-manager because of his '*experience.. and what he reached according to his age is huge*'.

My findings also highlight the presence of power dynamics in the *external network* at Nomad, which comprises clients, tenants, external mentors and coaches, and members. In Fatmah's case, she leveraged these external connections to broaden her knowledge beyond her immediate job role, gaining valuable insights from well-educated and culturally diverse individuals.

While Fatmah adopted a more passive subject position in learning characterised by her acceptance of the local market dynamics and preference for traditional knowledge sources in the given context, Abdullah believes that his learning would be better facilitated by working with international mentors in addition to local ones:

Abdullah: There's a ceiling to my learning because of the kind of mentors I have. My learning would be better facilitated by working with international startups, by meeting international mentors and not just local mentors ... who have a local mindset.

Abdullah also characterizes Nomad as being configured to local market dynamics (Orel & Dvoulety, 2020), which he believes limits his learning. Based on his comments about the limitations of the local network and the value of international mentors, I will argue Abdullah has adopted the subject position of an advocate, advocating for the importance of expanding the network beyond the local context in order to enhance learning. As the most senior employee at Nomad, it could be argued that Abdullah has developed a critical eye for evaluating the quality of different sources of information.

However, Abdullah's perspective also raises an ideological dilemma, as it suggests that learning is perceived as more valuable when it extends beyond local sources. This idea may stem from broader discourses of globalization and the belief that international experiences are inherently superior, and it may also mirror a lack of confidence in local learning opportunities.

4. Discussion

In the current study, I examined how employees at an SME coworking space provider in Kuwait describe the practice of informal learning in the context of workplace learning. My research findings indicate the existence of four distinct interpretive repertoires of informal learning, each with its own unique characteristics, purpose and individual's role within the organization. These interpretive repertoires included a focus on a fast-paced and flexible learning, entrepreneurial endeavors, networking, and collaborative learning.

This study confirms previous research on SMEs, which has shown that formal training opportunities are limited (Coetzer et al., 2019). At Nomad, it was found that employees primarily rely on informal channels for learning and development. This is in line with the widely accepted notion that informal learning is the most common mode of workplace learning (Kim & McLean, 2014). The results of this study further indicate that Nomad's employees depend on learning that is closely linked to their work (Lemmetty & Collin, 2020).

My study further shows that the informal learning that takes place at this SME is unstructured, impromptu, and reactive (Watkins & Marsick, 1992), which aligns with the fast-paced nature of the SME workplace and the need for employees to be flexible (Coetzer et al., 2017). Kankaras (2021) found that the type of workplace learning environment is largely influenced by the economic sector a company belongs to, and in this study, I found that the dynamic nature of the coworking industry, in particular, places an even greater emphasis on the need for employees to be agile in their learning. Given the specific characteristics of the industry, employees must continually acquire new skills and knowledge to keep up with the demands of the field.

However, this reliance on informal learning can also lead to a tension between the benefits of increased autonomy and empowerment, and the potential for overburdening of employees (Lemmetty & Collin, 2020; Garrick, 1998). From this viewpoint, learning can be considered problematic if an employee is unable to keep track of their own learning or if the employer does not provide the necessary support, and tools for monitoring learning (Lemmetty & Collin, 2020). In accordance with the work of Lemmetty and Colling (2020), the results of my study indicate that learning should not be completely self-driven, and the SME operations should have structures in place to help employees to learn, apply knowledge and skills, and manage challenges.

Informal learning at Nomad was also portrayed positively as empowering. In this context, learning was seen as a possibility rather than a responsibility (Lemmetty & Colling, 2020). Consistent with previous studies on SMEs (Coetzer et al., 2019), the sense of empowerment among employees at Nomad is shaped by their relationships with the owner-manager (Grieves, 2003). The owner-manager often challenges employees to strive for more. Furthermore, the open environment of the covering space encourages employees to be enterprising (Fournier, 1998), and to take initiative in seeking out new learning opportunities, which enhances their learning.

Furthermore, the unique nature of the coworking space at Nomad was emphasized as a location where employees collaborate on various projects, leading to learning opportunities. The collaborative learning activities found in this study align with the perspective of Kaendler et al. (2015), in which collaboration is seen as the sharing of knowledge to construct a shared understanding, while cooperation pertains to the individual tasks that are eventually brought together (Crans et al., 2021). The work environment of the employees in this study necessitates both cooperation and collaboration, and hence the collaborative learning activities may be an inherent part of the nature of their work (Crans et al., 2021).

The collaborative nature of the coworking space promotes the establishment of strong internal and external networks (Crans et al., 2021), which in turn promotes knowledge sharing, creativity, and idea generation (Bouncken et al., 2018). Employees describe the internal network as a family where there is mutual responsibility and loyalty. However, to effectively engage in social informal learning, employees needed to be aware of the relevant knowledge that their network can provide (Crans et al., 2021). In this study, employees tend to look to individuals with high status and power as sources of knowledge and expertise, which also affects how they approach self-directedness in their learning (Kim & McLean, 2014). They prefer to learn from more experienced colleagues or, ideally, the owner-manager. One possible explanation for this is that Kuwait has a high-power distance culture (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), where the owner-manager and senior members of staff can be seen as a fatherly figure (Kim & McLean, 2014).

Building relationships with internal colleagues was not the only valuable method of facilitating knowledge sharing. Participants also found external networks to be a unique source of information. They compared their local networks with international networks, which gave them a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities of working in Kuwaiti SMEs. This highlights how the cultural and societal context of Kuwait shapes the way informal learning is perceived and practiced within the SME coworking space. For example, the local culture places a strong emphasis on networking and collaboration (Hofstede et al., 2010), and this is reflected in the way participants described their informal learning practices as closely tied to building and maintaining relationships with both internal and external networks.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study has provided insight into the complexities of informal learning in the context of workplace learning within an SME coworking space provider in Kuwait. My findings suggest that informal learning in this context is highly unstructured, reactive and spontaneous (Marsick & Watkins, 1990), largely driven by internal and external networks, and shaped by the cultural and societal context. Additionally, my findings suggest that social informal learning is the most prominent way of learning in SMEs. These insights can help inform future research and assist in developing strategies for promoting informal learning within SME coworking spaces, as well as other SMEs. Further research is needed to explore the ways in which these contextual factors may impact the effectiveness of informal learning in the workplace.

6. Limitations

The limitations of this study must be considered. This study is based on a small sample and it does not seek to generalise its findings. Given the methods used, my research does not attend to the matter of causality (Conway & Briner, 2005). Furthermore, as I was in charge of the research from start to finish, this inevitably puts me in a position of control. As Archer (2002) argues problems with representation are involved throughout analysis and explanations of findings. Furthermore, the kind of information generated here is an outcome of the researcher selecting or, due to the constraints of this article, leaving out certain stories (Archer, 2002).

Conflict of interest: none.

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