Women's informal learning experiences at work: Perspectives of support staff in an educational institution

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ABSTRACT

Definitions and concepts of learning in the workplace have evolved considerably in the last two decades in response to significant changes impacting most workplace environments throughout the industrialized world. Comprehensive definitions of learning at work go beyond an emphasis on improving performance to consider the workplace as a social environment which can be structured to enhance or thwart adult learning and development. A wider and more socially relevant range of approaches to workplace learning are emerging.

By focusing on learning as a process rather than a product, this study attempts to gain a deeper understanding of the daily informal learning experiences among a group of clerical and secretarial workers. Through interviews and a qualitative research approach it examines the meanings these women attribute to their workplace learning experiences. It explores some of the ways in which women's unique learning capabilities interface with a particular environment.

RÉSUMÉ

Les définitions et les concepts d'apprentissage en milieu de travail ont considérablement évolué au cours des deux dernières décennies, en réponse aux changements significatifs qui affectent la plupart des milieux de travail du monde industrialisé. Au sens large, les définitions de l'apprentissage en milieu de travail vont au-delà de la nécessité d'améliorer le rendement pour envisager le milieu de travail sous l'angle d'un environnement social dont la structure peut susciter ou entraver l'apprentissage et le développement de l'adulte. On assiste ainsi à l'émergence d'approches plus étendues et plus pertinentes sur le plan social.

En focalisant la présente étude sur l'apprentissage en tant que processus plutôt qu'en tant que produit, nous tentons d'approfondir la compréhension des expériences d'apprentissage quotidiennes non structurées chez un groupe d'employées de bureau. Nous examinons, grâce à des entrevues et à une approche de recherche qualitative, la signification que ces femmes accordent à leurs expériences d'apprentissage en milieu de travail. Nous explorons certaines des manières dont les femmes adaptent leurs capacités d'apprentissage uniques à un milieu particulier.

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And finally, my thanks to the women who participated in the interviews; their willingness to answer questions and thoughtfulness in describing their experiences are the foundation upon which this study rests.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This study focuses on how women learn in a workplace environment. It is a case study of women working in clerical and secretarial support staff positions in a large metropolitan University in Eastern Canada. This study is qualitative, based on interviews with ten women during a four month period about their personal observations on learning at work.

Women's traditional roles as support staff and their place within this organizational structure have exposed them to a unique range of learning opportunities and experiences. Within the context of the workplace as a learning environment, this group's perceptions about their ongoing learning experiences were explored to discover common themes and patterns. By doing so, I hoped to make the daily process of informal learning at work more visible, particularly from the perspective of these workers.

Currently workplace learning focuses on an instrumental approach to increase performance, learning objectives and outcomes are determined beforehand and the achievement of these objectives is deemed a measure of successful learning. By contrast, this thesis is concerned with an alternate approach to workplace learning, an approach which values learning as a process. Outcomes are not necessarily known beforehand, and the learner's cognitive, motivational and emotional experiences are considered an integral part of the process. This thesis argues that what is being learned by examining the learning process itself, through day to day informal experiences, is equally important in workplace settings.

Based on personal observations and experiences resulting from my professional work in recruiting and staff development, several questions surfaced which stimulated a deeper interest in some of the issues support staff dealt with regularly.

An ongoing interest in adult learning and development led to the exploration of the relationship between women's potential for ongoing development and their experiences at work. The combination of this work experience with my studies in adult learning is an acknowledgement and affirmation of a growing awareness that experience-based learning is at the foundation of adult learning and development.

The Setting: the organizational context

The setting for this study is a large metropolitan University with an international reputation, active in teaching and research. Like many similar educational institutions, this one is currently facing the challenges of diminishing financial resources and the need for greater accountability, both to the public who funds their purse, and to a diverse student body with a variety of needs and expectations. Provincial government support has gradually dwindled and privatization in some form or other, looms on the horizon. Although controversial, business and industry links can potentially grow stronger as the University sector's research capabilities are tapped for the practical purposes of remaining competitive in a global marketplace.

As is the case in the business world, this institution is not exempt from demands on workers to be highly productive and effective, workers capable of doing more with less. The trend in job requirements over several years has emphasized a broader range of skills in even the lower level clerical positions. With the mushrooming availability of recent Office Systems Technology graduates, it is now possible, in a well automated office, to have one "clerk" do the work previously done by two. The formerly prevalent repetitious, or highly structured work of copy-typing or data entry has gradually been replaced by a greater need for "coordinators" of multiple tasks and roles. Even support staff at entry level now require good organizational

and interpersonal skills, comprehensive computer knowledge, excellent communication skills, and are preferably bilingual, if not trilingual. The ability to adapt positively to change, continue learning, take on responsibility and show initiative while working autonomously, or with others, is valued at every level.

During the past decade, enormous changes have been made to the technological infrastructure of the University. There has been a steady, if not exponential emphasis on creating a highly computer literate environment. Although some units within the University are far ahead of others in integrating the latest computer and information technology, the trend shows no signs of abating. If anything, given the University's main focus of teaching and research, the integration of new communication and information technologies will likely become more important. Local area networks, communications via e-mail, electronically transmitted approval systems are now a part of daily reality for many support staff.

Unlike the private sector, employees at this University tend towards longevity. In fact, it's not unusual to find many who have celebrated twenty or twenty five years of service with the University, while still in their early forties. The University offers generous benefits in the form of pensions, health, life and dental insurance, as well as employment security. Policies exist which support maternity leaves, tuition assistance, and even mortgage loans. Opportunities for development exist through continuing education programs, computer workshops, training workshops, as well as free tuition and flex time for those interested in pursuing undergraduate or graduate studies.

In recent years the need to adjust to successive waves of budget cuts and organizational down-sizing, as well as ongoing technological advancements, have placed greater demands on everyone working in this setting. "Survivors" are expected to take on a heavier workload and/or a wider range of responsibilities.

New territorial boundaries are defined regularly - departments merge, new projects are initiated while old ones are abandoned, and deadwood is jettisoned. Reactions among 'survivors' range from feeling overwhelmed and anxious to becoming proactively involved in new ventures.

It is within such a workplace setting that participants' day- to-day informal learning experiences are explored.

The Participants

Through their experiences, participants in this study represent the variety of working opportunities available to clerks and secretaries within this institution. Whether working in administrative units such as Admissions, or as support staff in academic units, their jobs include a wide range of coordinating and administrative tasks as well as the need to cater to a diverse population - from students, to faculty, to senior administrative officers.

Each of the participants has more than a decade's experience working within the same institution. Although the environment represents a 'static' quality in the sense that these employees have employment security, it is nevertheless an environment in which employees experience considerable change. The institution is large enough to offer career mobility and alternative working possibilities to support staff. In addition, support staff often work in a department reporting to academics who periodically rotate responsibility for departmental administration among themselves; this commonly occurs every two to four years.

In addition, many of the women in this study represent a group of workers who have experienced the changes brought on by the transition to an increasingly

computerized environment. Recalling the days of IBM Selectrics and gestetners with nostalgia, most have come by their "office systems technology" skills through on-the-job experience, often supplemented by in house computer workshops.

Background

Concepts of learning in the workplace have evolved considerably in the last two decades in response to significant changes impacting the workplace throughout the industrialized world. As Charles Handy (1989) puts it, we are now in an era of "discontinuous" change where the traditional means of predicting and controlling change are no longer reliable or effective in managing organizations effectively. The tremendous changes affecting the workplace, and the social contract between employer and employee are replete with opportunities: either for growth and development, or for exploitation and oppression. The constant need to adapt - to new technologies, re-organization, the demands to do better with fewer resources, and the transitions of organizational styles in managing resources (including people), have become commonplace. Workers' ability to learn, grow, and change is often under relentless pressure. Comprehensive definitions of learning at work go beyond an emphasis on improving performance to consider the workplace as a social environment which can be structured to enhance or thwart adult learning and development. A wider and more socially relevant range of approaches to workplace learning are emerging. People from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines are interested in consciously creating a learning environment in the workplace as a critical adaptive measure for our times.

Summary of the main issues of this thesis

This chapter introduces the context as well as some of the concepts about workplace learning on which this study is based. The literature review in Chapter Two is separated into two distinct yet related sections. The first section discusses some of the debates regarding the workplace as a learning environment and emphasizes an approach which takes into account the socially constructed nature of the workplace. Since the notions of competence and skill are central to workplace learning strategies, some controversies around these notions are further explored. The second section focuses on concepts of learning as a continuous process and refers specifically to informal learning. The literature in this section explores ideas about meaningful learning which is often rooted in every day experience and within a particular context. In addition, we consider some of the knowledge emerging about women's unique approaches to and experiences with learning.

Chapter Three provides an orientation to the research methods used in this study and claims that the qualitative approach corresponds well with the purpose of this study. The research questions are listed and explained to reveal more about my intent and interests as a researcher.

In Chapter Four we hear the voices of the participants themselves describing their meaningful learning experiences in the workplace. The various sections are based on themes and patterns which emerged from the interview data. Links between the data and the literature are explored regularly.

The study closes with Chapter Five and some reflections on what the data has revealed about the concept of learning in the workplace from the perspective of the women in this study.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore participants' perceptions of their day to day meaningful learning experiences at work in order to identify some common themes among them.

Although the development of skills and abilities to perform effectively at work has been, and will continue to be, the cornerstone of most workplace learning strategies, this study approaches the subject from a different perspective. While not ignoring the importance of learning skills for the purpose of improving work performance (widely known as an instrumental approach), this study explores the personal meanings women attribute to their learning experiences at work. It focuses on participants' learning processes, the value they place on what is learned, and the impact this learning may have on their personal development or identity. Based on definitions of what learning at work means to them personally, various themes are identified and explored.

Significance

As already mentioned, the dominant approach to workplace learning is the development of skills and abilities to improve performance. This instrumental approach usually focuses on a deficit model of learning - identifying what's missing and filling the gap, and as such, is considered by several researchers in workplace learning, to have serious limitations.

The significance of this study is its exploration of learning as it unfolds through day to day, on-the-job experiences. It is based on the notion that learning is a constant process rather than solely a product of some kind of teaching interventions. This

focus on process rather than product addresses some of the criticisms raised regarding the instrumental approach to workplace learning. In response to the many claims made that the modern workplace requires a flexible workforce, capable of ongoing learning and adaptation to rapid change, this study hopes to contribute to a broader understanding of some factors that either support or hinder ongoing learning in the workplace.

Support staff traditionally have their learning needs defined for them, possibly due to their place within an organizational hierarchy. This study provides an opportunity to hear their voices, and understand the meanings they attribute to their learning experiences at work. The possibility exists that the findings of this study may highlight learning commonly taken for granted or devalued. Hopefully, it can also provide some insights into what it is that constitutes a 'workplace as a learning environment', from the perspective of these workers.

Chapter 2: Issues and Literature

This study draws upon various strands of literature in order to present a coherent perspective on the informal workplace learning experiences of the women in this study. This chapter begins with a review of literature on the workplace as a learning environment, focusing on the viewpoints of various interest groups, and some of the debates among them. Central to the debates is the idea that notions of what constitutes learning at work needs broadening and integration. Concepts of individual skill and competence are explored to expose their social roots, and a framework is introduced to understand the workplace as a social environment in which skills and competence can either be enhanced or thwarted.

This is followed by a review of literature on the adult learner. Experiential learning (learning from experience) is a central theme in this section. The findings of researchers who have contributed to our understanding of the scope of experiential learning, and the implications for providing a supportive environment which will enhance adult learning, are presented. In this vein, the unique perspective contributed by research on women's developmental experiences provide an additional relevant dimension to this study.

A) The workplace as a learning environment

Recognition of the workplace as an environment in which learning takes place is of enormous interest to researchers from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds: industrial, economic, government, management, social (including labour unions, community workers, feminists), psychological and educational. Several researchers point to the notion that, whether by intent or otherwise, as a social environment, the workplace functions as a setting in which adults continue to learn on an ongoing

basis. (Galbraith, Lawler & Assoc., 1993; Lennerlof, 1989; Leymann, Andersson & Olsson, 1989; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Rainbird, 1988; Senge, 1990; Turk, 1992). Pateman (1970) advanced the notion that the workplace is the fundamental training site for a participatory democratic society. Because workplaces in the industrialized world are undergoing such phenomenal change, many researchers call for an integration and widening of the research base on working environments to incorporate social as well as psychological implications (Kornbluh & Greene, 1989; Langenbach, 1994; Leymann, 1989; Marsick, 1991b; Watkins, 1991; Weisbord, 1987; Welton 1991). Growing evidence exists to indicate that certain features of organizational design foster learning and innovation in contrast to those organizations designed for stability which often tend to block forces for change by supporting behaviour patterns that stifle learning (Argyris, 1982; Galbraith et al, 1993; Handy, 1989; Weisbord, 1987).

Of the various interest groups concerned with workplace learning or training, I will briefly discuss the perspectives of government, business, community, labour and education to provide an overview of some current issues and debates on the topic. I have tried to report what I understand to be the main interests of each group.

As part of the concern for a productive society able to compete in a global marketplace, governments emphasize the need for a highly skilled and adaptable workforce which they see as key to maintaining a competitive edge internationally. In this respect, the government perspective has much in common with the business sector (Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 1989; Mansell, 1987). The main difference between the governmental and business perspectives is over who should foot the bill for developing and maintaining this highly skilled workforce. A recent phenomenon among governments is to encourage the business sector to become more involved in training and retraining employees. For example, the introduction of Bill 90 in Quebec makes organizations accountable for workforce training; either

training is provided and accounted for or, businesses are taxed and thus contribute to a provincial training fund.

The changing economics of work, from that of exploiting natural resources to nurturing human intelligence, from resource to service based, from a national to a global economy requiring technological and computer skills, is having an impact on the relationship between employer and employee. Constant restructuring, merging, adaptations to new technology and a global marketplace, permit and even encourage experimentation with different employer/ employee relationship models. Within a free market system, companies can farm out unskilled labour to third world countries and automation continues to displace growing numbers of workers, while business simultaneously claims it requires a better educated, more flexible workforce willing to learn on an ongoing basis. Instead of employment security, more and more businesses are saying 'we have work for you only as long as you have the skills we need'.

Interestingly, the labour perspective questions government and business suggestions about the need for greater numbers of highly educated workers. Labour statistics consistently report that the most significant growth in "new jobs will be toward the bottom of the skill range: cashiers, janitors, cleaners, truck drivers, waiters, nurses aides and attendants and salespeople." (Turk, 1992 p.2). As for the claim that computer literacy will be essential even in these circumstances, Turk points to the actual deskilling of workers in these environments, noting that "everything is programmed so that an untrained workforce, with minutes of training, working short shifts, with lots of employee turnover, can turn out a remarkably consistent product that meets the employers' specifications almost flawlessly." (Ibid.)

Labour is critical of the business sector which is free to maximize profits and increase productivity, technologically or otherwise, with minimal responsibility to

displaced workers. In this respect, both labour and government share common ground, but for different reasons. Labour's view of workforce skills training is that it should be "developmental, taught in ways not simply limited to a particular job. The participant should come away from the experience better able to take on a variety of tasks and more confident as a learner... [The experience should] help people have more control over their jobs and their work life, learn more about individual and collective rights and reflect the workers' identification of skill needs and equip everyone with the skills and knowledge to function fully in their lives at work, at home and in the community". (Turk 1992, p.89) As will be seen shortly, this is rather a tall order when compared with the current emphasis in many developed countries on competency based training and learning.

The social and community perspective on workplace learning encourages innovative approaches and a redefinition of what constitutes work; questions are raised about: Who has jobs? What kind? Does it include unpaid work? From this perspective, the economic emphasis on competitiveness and productivity also makes new social and political demands on workplace participants. Mears (1988) suggests that the way work is organized requires as much innovation as any technological innovation: changing organizational structures from hierarchical to committed high performance teams that depend on cooperation and individual initiative; multi-skilled workers capable of self supervision; the revamping of policies and collective agreements that conspire against innovation or changing roles; contracting out; telecommuting; changing roles between managers and workers. If such organizational innovations emerge, what will new forms of control look like? From this broader vantage point, one gains a different picture of the complexity and range of skills required to be considered a member of a "productive society".

Educators' interest in workplace learning centers around ongoing debates about the enormous impact that business has had on education in general. Hyland (1991) exemplifies the criticisms of competency based training and learning - "which has

given primacy to the efficiency of the education system in meeting the needs of the economy" (p.80). Indeed, several researchers lament the narrow or ineffectual definitions of competence adopted by the economic sector (Ashworth, Saxton, 1990; Jackson, 1994a; Welton 1991, 1993) The concerns they raise are central to many of the issues fundamental to this study. Hyland (1991), for example, puts the matter succinctly by stressing his "..moral objections to the behaviourist position that underpins competence based learning, the chief of which is that predetermined objectives stress only the instrumental value of knowledge and thus foster an impoverished conception of human learning... at its worst the use of behavioural objectives may border on indoctrination rather than on education." (p.83)

Marsick (1991b) provides an overview of the way the behaviourist approach to workplace training and learning, although dominant, was more suited to the industrial, production oriented workplace. Also referred to as Taylorism, after the engineer who introduced scientific management principles into the workplace to increase productivity, behaviourist teaching/learning strategies are more appropriate in machine like organizations. Situations calling for precise techniques, with little room for variation, like the assembly line, lend themselves to Tayloristic principles, and these are also the very environments in which automation is now displacing so many workers. Marsick points out that although alternatives to the dominant behaviourist approach to workplace learning have always existed, now that we are faced with ongoing change, alternative approaches are even more critical. Some of these alternative approaches will be explored in greater detail in the section of this chapter which focuses on adult learning theories.

In reviewing the literature on workplace learning it quickly became evident that focusing on any one link in the chain automatically touched upon other related issues. To better understand the scope of workplace learning, and the experiences participants shared with me, several considerations guided my readings: What was

being learned? by whom? and under what conditions? (i.e. where did they "fit" in an organizational culture). What circumstances led to workplace learning being acknowledged? How were learning opportunities made accessible? How and by whom were learning needs defined? Readings brought to light interconnecting notions about learning at work: skill development was linked to developing competence and personal development, which were in turn affected by whatever range of possibilities existed within a given set of social relationships and circumstances. These interrelated concepts were at the heart of debates about the kinds of work environments that either fostered effective learning, or restricted it.

The Influence of Habermas

Several scholars, critical of the narrow behaviourist paradigm adhered to in competency based learning, draw upon the ideas of Jurgen Habermas (1987, 1984) in proposing a wider and more socially relevant range of approaches to workplace learning. Habermas, a critical theorist, "shifts the focus away from the individual learner to how the social structure, organizations, and institutions define, constrict, and even oppress learning." (Welton, 1993 p.81) Deeply affected by the atrocities of wartime Europe, Habermas questioned the extremes to which the scientific doctrine of efficiency and effectiveness could drive humanity. Habermas believed that the scientific way of knowing, upon which the behaviourist paradigm is founded, was overestimated and certainly not the only valid form of knowledge to help understand the relationship between learning and the human condition. In my brief descriptions that follow I have tried to summarize Habermas' influence on understanding human knowledge as manifesting in three different forms: 1) instrumental or technical, 2) practical or dialogic, and 3) self-reflective or emancipatory (Hart, 1990; Grundy, 1993; Marsick, 1991a; Mezirow, 1990; Welton, 1993).

Instrumental/ Technical: frequently the focus of technical training; task oriented problem solving approach; interest in predetermined objectives and outcomes; prediction and control are significant; reflects the interests and concerns of the widespread behaviourist approach to workplace learning.

Practical/ Dialogic: focus on communication between people; learning about cultural norms (workplace included); interest in understanding how humans make and share meanings; the impact on learners of open, honest dialogue versus communication intended to deceive or limit access to knowledge.

Self Reflective/ Emancipatory: critical reflection about oneself as a member of a larger social unit; learning to understand oneself and the need for self-change; dealing with power relations; the desire to achieve emancipation from domination or control.

Adult educators, psychologists, sociologists, feminists and policy makers influenced by Habermas "think of worker education as the process of becoming knowledgeable about the way in which the structure of work enables or impedes human development and learning, including acquiring the ability to participate freely in communication processes within the enterprise and learning to be skilful in executing technically appropriate jobs tasks" (Welton 1993, p.84). Although Habermas does not deny the relevance of learning skills to execute job tasks, the potential for learning that he envisions for the workplace reflects a variety of qualitatively different kinds of learning and an underlying concern for dominance free social relations and communications rather than adherence to a status quo. (Grundy, 1993; Hart, 1990)

From this broader perspective of learning at work we turn now to the notion of 'skill' and some ideas about how it comes to be defined in the workplace.

Defining Skill

> ..definition of 'work' and 'skill' depends in part on who has the power to define, as well as on the circumstances a definition is meant to fit and the interests it is meant to serve. The work of crafting a definition and making it stick are part of the political process, and an important means by which power is secured and defended... It is not an object or an entity that some folks have and others do not but rather a relation between people and things. The relevant question to ask is not which workers have skills, but which skills get selected for recognition and reward and which do not. (Jackson, 1991, p. 13-19)

Several researchers shed light on the concept of skill. Questions are raised about how skills come to be defined and who is involved defining them, whether technology in a particular setting increases or lowers the demand for skills, how skill is a product of social opportunity, how skills are generated by environmental factors, whether or not certain skills are recognized, and - what factors contribute to skills being recognized, or ignored.

In his seminal work, Braverman (1974) confronted the then popular view that changing work conditions required a 'better trained', 'better educated' working population and questioned whether workers were moving towards greater average skills or greater polarization of skills. He described trends in work restructuring where managers retain for themselves those skills most highly valued and contributing towards human development, while tasks delegated to the average worker were systematized to be easily controlled or automated, contributing to the phenomenon of 'de-skilling'. He states for example, that the emphasis on speed as a skill, is in fact a form of de-skilling. (p.446)

As a result of conducting various studies on the consequences of automation, Lennerlof (1989) comments on developments towards increasing polarization of skill in the workplace. While some workers move towards increasingly demanding tasks,

others seem to be moving down the scale. Although his studies showed conflicting results, making it difficult to make comparisons, he did reach the conclusion that "new technology can apparently be used in varying ways with different consequences for the work environment". (p.18)

Grounded in a historical perspective on the impact of technological innovation in the workplace, Zuboff (1988) points out the unbroken link between the 'division of learning' and 'division of labour'. Thus, the very way in which technological innovations are integrated and structured in a setting has an impact on the quality of learning. Zuboff believes we have reached a pivotal stage with information technology in our workplaces. She coins the term 'informate' as opposed to 'automate', to emphasize the dissimilar skill requirements inherent in each - separating the communicative and coordinative responsibilities from the physical demands of continuous production.

> As an automating technology, computerization can intensify the clerk's exile from the coordinative sphere of the managerial process. As an informating technology, on the other hand, it can provide the occasion for a reintegration of the clerical role with its managerial past and for a reinvigoration of the knowledge demands associated with the middle-management function. (p.126)

Hirschhorn, Gilmore, & Newell, (1989) point out that our post industrial economy is more likely to require people who become resources to each other. With traditional role relationships becoming blurred, they argue that workers and managers are primarily learning new roles, rather than new skills.

The skills we possess as workers are not just something unique to us as individuals. Our job skills are rooted in the social unit we inhabit and therefore in this context, the possibilities available to us within any given work environment, implying a reciprocal relationship in skills development, between the individual and the organization (Eurich, 1985; Jackson, 1991; Langenbach, 1994; Pipan 1994). The

kinds of skills workers have access to developing reflect not only their intrinsic abilities, but also the organization's expectations of them, as well as the limitations placed upon them. Ample evidence exists demonstrating that divisions in the quality of learning experiences and skill development tend to reflect social stratification in society, and by extension - the workplace (Pipan, 1994; Zuboff, 1988).

Within this context of the workplace as a social and political environment, the ways in which skills come to be defined and the people involved in the process play a critical role in determining which skills are acknowledged, and which ignored (Cockburn, 1991; Jackson, 1991, 1994b; Pipan, 1994; Rainbird, 1988).

> Perhaps one of the most obvious characteristics of human experience in workplaces is that some of us are expected to know, are required to know, are prevented from knowing, or are forbidden to know certain things. From a perspective of sociology of knowledge, one can detect patterns in who is expected to know what: that is - Who has access to what information? Who is able to interpret the signs? Who is responsible for making the signs? Where are you able to go with what you know?
>
> (Pipan, 1994, p.159)

My general impression of the literature on skill development and acknowledgement was that a strong male bias existed in the way job skills are identified and also in the way they are validated. Indeed, the writings of Cockburn, (1991) Jackson, (1991) and Welton (1991), to name a few, confirmed that this bias does exist. Reviewing the work of several feminist researchers, Welton (1991) observes:

> ..an adequate concept of skill must comprehend that skill definitions are 'saturated with sexual bias' From a developmental, learner-centered perspective... many feminists have argued that the classification of women's jobs as unskilled frequently is not synchronised with the actual amount of knowledge and skill required for their jobs - that is, they have pointed to the 'socially constructed nature of skill'. ..skill is often an ideological category imposed on certain types of work by virtue of the sex and power of the workers who perform it.
>
> Feminist concerns and postindustrial possibilities are poignantly manifest in clerical occupations. ..two factors complicate efforts to assess trends in the

> skill levels of clerical work. First, the managerial impulse to reduce clerical workers' skill is present in workplace political struggles, and this deskilling impulse is interwoven with the patriarchal devaluing of the secretarial work performed by women. Second, different stages in the automation process in offices must be recognized. Initial stages of computerization did, indeed, create large numbers of low-skilled data entry jobs... More recently, the trend has shifted toward a more decentralized use of computers and word processing, with more positive consequences for clerical skills. (pp. 19-20)

Jackson (1991) points out the ways in which women's skills are often rendered invisible by virtue of the way work is organized within a hierarchy.

> 'Job tunnelling' and 'shearing' are central to the invisibility and appropriation of the skills of women. [There exists a] highly technical and professional practice by which the complexity of work and the skills and knowledge of female workers are reassigned to those above them in a job hierarchy... women's learning in the workplace tends to be an informal - and unacknowledged - a product of her working relations. Except for nursing, women's occupations tend not to have a formal system of advancement based on incremental certifications. (p.26)

Placing the concept of skill formation at work in a social, historical perspective, Offe (1985), believes we can no longer make the same assumptions about workplace skill derived solely from our industrial heritage. A basic distinction to help us make sense of work in our time is the difference between productive and service forms of labour. We need a "separate rationality of service labour' (Offe 1985, p.137)

> The work of teaching, curing, planning, organising, negotiating, controlling, administering and counselling... these 'people-producing' jobs require the learned skills of 'interactive competence, consciousness of responsibility, and acquired practical experience empathy'. (Ibid. p. 138)

Zuboff (1988) extends the notion of "action-centered" skill, and differentiates between 'acting on' or 'acting with' as a way to understand the distinction between production and service forms of labour. For clerical employees, the "mode of their knowledge is 'acting with'; they use their active presence as a medium for learning, coordinating, and communicating within a web of complex human relationships." (p.174)

> When it comes to action centered skills, the crucial know-how that distinguishes skillful from mediocre performance eludes formal codification. People learn by experience - imitating and attempting. Action centered skill can be lived and it can be witnessed, but it vanishes into mere potential when the action is completed. It leaves no trace, except for the know-how acquired by its practitioners and the effects it has produced. Action-centered skills thus are limited to the time frame of events and the presence of actors in the context where those events can occur. (Ibid, p.175)

Reading the literature made me more alert to the ways in which participants described their skills. I listened for clues to indicate whether participants believed their knowledge was recognized or validated by their supervisors, or by the organization. I paid particular attention to learning experiences they described which demonstrated whether they were encouraged or restricted in skill development - and at what levels this encouragement or restriction was manifested. I was also interested in their own perceptions of their skills, regardless of how others may have perceived them. I will return to these issues in later chapters.

Issues in the Competency Debate

Having discussed Habermas' influence on understanding learning from a wider perspective, in this section I review some of the criticisms levelled at workplace learning strategies which focus exclusively on the behavioural paradigm reflected in the instrumental/ technical mode described earlier. The criticisms of the current heavy reliance on competency based measures in workplace learning further convinced me of the value of pursuing a qualitative study to explore what support staff actually perceived about learning at work on a daily basis.

Narrow definitions of competence, when strictly adhered to, are seen as contributing to the deskilling of workers (Ashworth, Saxton, 1990; Brookfield, 1986; Welton, 1991, 1993). Hyland (1991) asserts that an inordinate emphasis on instrumental learning "borders on indoctrination, actually impoverishing human learning" (p.83).

Ashworth and Saxton (1990) find carefully analysed appraisals of the value and limitations of competence rare. They point out that competence as usually applied focuses attention in learning and assessment on the individual, neglecting the importance of context or social environment (p.13). Commenting on the a general concern for learners' abilities to transfer a given skill from one situation to another, they attribute the lack of this ability to "shallowness of the learning", emphasizing that the competency framework offers no guarantees for increased depth of understanding.

> ..any skill or knowledge is part of a person's 'lived world', it gains its meaning partly from the context in which it is learned. It is an error to regard the competence as an isolated mental capacity, divorced from the lived environment. The problem of transfer from one context to another is not likely to be solved merely by assessing knowledge and skill in terms of individual competence. (Ashworth & Saxton, 1990, p.15)

Jackson (1994a) explores issues surrounding the prevalence of the competency based approach which 'proliferates on several continents' in spite of overwhelming evidence pointing to its limitations in improving learning. She concedes that in our current economic climate, competency measures are in fact a 'seductive tool' for bureaucratic officials who need to be seen as accountable for their decisions. Despite the rhetoric that competency measures are concerned with achievements of learners, or that institutional efficiency and flexibility increases as a result of adopting these measures, "evidence is overwhelming that institutional processes become more bureaucratized, more cumbersome, more time consuming, more costly, more frustrating and put more power in the hands of those who are the further removed and know the least about education and training" (p.144).

Brookfield (1986) expresses his concern that equating adult learning with instrumental learning (i.e. "learning how to perform at an improved level of competence in some predefined skill domain") is highly reductionist. This "can lead to a neglect of the complexity and multifaceted nature of learning... for example the

reflective domain of learning which accounts for most significant personal learning." (p.99). Brookfield's views about the reflective domain of learning links up with Habermas' ideas about the scope of human learning possibilities within the workplace, and it will be discussed further in the adult learning section of this literature review .

Lennerlof's Bi-Polar Environmental Factors

Lennerlof's (1989) article helped me develop a framework to bring different areas into sharper focus, providing a structure for developing the research questions. After reviewing various working environment research models, Lennerlof proposes building upon and going beyond these behavioural models to an expanded concept of work environments. He cites Sweden's Work Environment Act as a piece of legislation which takes into consideration a broader, more inclusive range of workplace issues that are no longer adequately served by a behavioural, instrumental approach. The Act encompasses issues such as: all working conditions must be suited to both the physical and psychological characteristics of the individual worker; workers must be afforded the opportunity of influencing their own situations; work should entail as little physical and psychological danger as possible and should also facilitate personal involvement, job satisfaction and individual development. Lennerlof proposes viewing workplace learning in the context of "bi-polar environmental factors". At one end of the continuum exist those working conditions favourable to learning, in the sense that workers develop competence, confidence and personality growth. At the other end are those conditions which promote restrictive behaviours or learned helplessness. Building on research conducted by Seligman (1975), Lennerlof makes a valuable point - it's not a question of workers learning or not learning in a particular setting. We are in fact always learning as adults, it is rather the quality of what is being learned in different

circumstances that support enhanced learning experiences versus limiting or restrictive learning experiences. For example, "learned helplessness" is a response to conditions where one learns to be helpless as a result of constantly having ideas rejected, or feeling that regardless of actions taken, there is no favourable outcome.

These notions that different environmental factors can have an impact on the development of competence and confidence versus learned helplessness are echoed in the research on women's development conducted by Belenky et al (1986), and will be taken up again later in this chapter.

The consequences of bi-polar environmental factors have an impact on our learning in the cognitive, motivational and emotional domains. In the cognitive domain, one is aware of skills and abilities growing or developing as opposed to stagnating or regressing. Motivational consequences pertain to being active or proactive as opposed to being passive. Emotional consequences relate to feelings of satisfaction with one's work as opposed to feeling despondent or depressed about work. Although I present these concepts here in table form, the ideas are more relevant to this study if considered along a continuum that is dynamic and flowing, rather than static or dualistic.

Figure 1

BI-POLAR ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

WORKING CONDITIONS	
Favourable to learning	Not favourable to learning
Development of competence and personality growth	Restrictive, narrowing range of competencies
Learned competence	Learned helplessness
COGNITIVE CONSEQUENCES	
Development	Stagnation/ Retardation
MOTIVATIONAL CONSEQUENCES	
Active / Pro-active	Passive
EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCES	
Satisfaction	Despondency / Depression

Lennerlof's 'bi-polar environmental factors' provides a useful framework for exploring learning within the context of the workplace. Against this background, several important links between the individual and the social environment are made more apparent: the impact of working conditions; the various roles played by workers depending on their place within an organizational structure; and the interrelationship between roles and the range of competencies a worker is supported in acquiring, or restricted from acquiring.

To recap briefly, in this first section of the literature review we have examined some of the ideas about the scope of learning possibilities within the workplace from the perspective of different interest groups. The views of educators and social critics were emphasized to broaden our understanding of elements which contribute

to a truly educative workplace environment. The limitations of a strictly instrumental approach to learning were discussed and our awareness of skill development within a social context is enhanced. In addition, a broad framework against which to view perceptions of competence within different contexts was introduced.

In the following section, adult learning theories relevant to ongoing learning in the workplace are reviewed.

B) Adult Development - Learning Along the Way

> Learning is the fundamental pattern of human adaptation, but mostly it occurs before or after or in the interstices of schooling. Preoccupied with schooling, most research on human learning is focused on learning that depends on teaching or is completed in a specified context rather than on the learning that takes place spontaneously because it fits directly into life. (Bateson, 1994, p. 197)

Despite widespread evidence to the contrary, many of our notions about learning still associate 'real learning' with being taught. It's not that learning as a 'fundamental pattern of human adaptation' is not recognized, but we are less familiar with the vocabulary to describe the terrain. Valuing our informal learning experiences does not come easily. This is partially due to the inordinate significance our culture places on formal education as a basis for learning. And, as Jarvis (1987) points out, our concept of knowledge as a society exposes a much greater interest in the product - rather than the process of learning - which ultimately leads to informally acquired forms of knowledge being neglected or ignored.

Researchers in adult learning consistently find that the learning experiences considered significant by adults, (i.e. valued and considered pertinent to their development) are largely "informal" (Jarvis, 1987; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Rogers, 1994.) Adults' life experiences become a rich resource upon which they draw as they continue to learn and adapt to new circumstances in life and in work (Jarvis, 1987; Knowles, 1978, 1980, 1984; Kolb, 1984; Pipan, 1994; Sorohan, 1993). Furthermore, reflection on these life experiences, followed by re-integration or release, provides adults with new levels of understanding and awareness (Bateson, 1994; Belenky et al, 1986; Boud, et al, 1985; Brookfield, 1986; Mezirow, 1990, 1991). The social context in which the individual's learning takes place is recognized not only as having an impact on the quality of learning - but also as a matrix which the individual can influence in turn (Bandura, 1986; Friere, 1970; Jarvis, 1987)

As an anthropologist, Bateson, quoted earlier, shares a similar point of view about learning to that of psychologist Carl Rogers. Rogers' (1994) theory of learning confronted problems which he considered to be maladaptive in our changing society. Rogers examined how individuals learn best, and then applied this knowledge to facilitate individual adaptation to ongoing change, personal development and the improvement of interpersonal relationships. He distinguished between two different types of learning along a continuum of meaning; at one extreme is education where the material learned has no personal meaning ("from the neck up") and at the other extreme is significant, meaningful, experiential learning which involves the whole person, mentally and emotionally - referred to as being "learner-centered". Rogers surmised that the outcomes of "teaching" - were actually unimportant or hurtful as they stifled significant learning and individual learners often came to distrust their own experiences. It is worth pointing out the connection between Rogers' concept of significant learning and the Lennerlof framework presented earlier which takes into account the cognitive, motivational and emotional consequences of learning in different environments.

Furthermore, Rogers pointed out that the "most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning, a continuing openness to experience and incorporation into oneself of the process of change" (p. 164). As a process, this has little in common with prescribed content and sequenced curriculum pervasive in formal education. He describes the 'process of learning' as being sometimes fascinating, and sometimes frightening:

> ..letting experience carry me on, in a direction which appears to be forward, toward goals that I can but dimly define, as I try to understand at least the current meaning of that experience... sensation is that of floating with a complex stream of experience with the fascinating possibility of trying to comprehend its ever changing complexity. (p.154)

Also concerned with humans' ability to adapt to change, Bateson (1994) conveys an image of the process of learning emphasizing that most learning is not linear.

> Lessons too complex to grasp in a single occurrence spiral past again and again, small examples gradually revealing greater and greater implications... Spiral learning moves through complexity with partial understanding, allowing for later returns. (p.30)

Related to Rogers' and Bateson's concepts of 'learning about the process of learning' and 'spiral learning', Bridges (1980) described transitions in developmental terms as "a natural process of disorientation and reorientation that mark turning points of the path of growth" (p. 5). Sugarman (1986) identified seven stages accompanying a wide range of transitions: immobilization; a sense of being overwhelmed; sharp swings of mood; letting go, breaking with the past; exploration of new terrain; conscious striving to learn from the experience, and finally, integration.

The work of Malcolm Knowles underpins much of our current understanding about adult learning, and helps to cultivate our awareness of informal learning. Knowles (1980) developed a model of assumptions about adult learners, which he termed "andragogy", as distinct from "pedagogy". Considerable controversy exists regarding andragogy vs pedagogy as a teaching/learning concept, centering on key distinctions between the two: andragogy is considered the art and science of helping adults learn, whereas pedagogy relates to the art and science of teaching children.

Interested in helping us understand the 'process' of adult learning, Jarvis (1987) sheds light on an important aspect of the controversy which is relevant to this study. He was more concerned with the examination of learning processes from a social perspective - an approach not meant to deny the psychological perspective - but to complement it. The issue Jarvis builds on for his own social theory of learning compares the context of the relationship between teacher and learner illustrated by andragogy and pedagogy. Jarvis points out that the difference in abilities and expectations between a child and an adult are not so much an age issue as they are a social status issue.

In a similar vein, Bateson (1989) provides an interesting perspective on the notion of pedagogy as embedded in a unique representation of social relationships:

> When any relationship is characterized by difference, particularly a disparity in power, there remains a tendency to model it on the parent-child relationship. (p. 105)

The following synopsis of the assumptions which have come to be defined as 'andragogy', are presented in the spirit of acknowledging the human capacity to learn and behave autonomously, as well as interdependently, within various social settings:

> 1. Adults strive for autonomy and self-direction in learning, (though they may be dependant in certain circumstances).
>
> 2. Adults' experiences are a rich resource for learning; they learn through using their own and each others' experience. Open discussion and dialogue promote the integration of experiences between the individual and others.
>
> 3. Adults are aware of specific learning needs generated by real life tasks or problems. They become ready to learn when they experience a need to know or to do something in order to perform more effectively in some aspect of their lives.
>
> 4. Adults have a task-centred or problem-centered orientation to learning.
>
> 5. For many adults, the internal motivators of self-esteem, increased self-confidence and recognition are highly valued as an impetus for learning.
>
> (adapted from Knowles, 1980, 1984)

Self-Directed and Experiential Learning

The literature on self-directed learning also reveals considerable debate over its exact meaning. Some definitions of self-directed learning model the approach of formal education to learning - that is, the linear, sequential approach which is dependent on instruction within a specified context. This approach emphasizes the learner's ability to independently diagnose needs, locate resources, and then plan

and evaluate learning activities. Brookfield (1986) questions the premises on which traditional definitions of self-directed learning are founded and suggests alternative perspectives. He expands the definition of self-directed learning by pointing out that the concept is usually defined "in terms of externally observable learning activities or behaviours rather than in terms of internal, mental dispositions." (p. 40). Brookfield provides a broader view of self-directed learning by examining the concepts of field independence / dependence and learning styles to illustrate his perspective.

Field independent learners are defined as analytical, socially independent, inner-directed, individualistic and possessed of a strong sense of self-identity - qualities traditionally associated with self-directed learners. In contrast, field dependent learners are extrinsically oriented, responsive to external reinforcement, aware of context, view things holistically, and are cognizant of the effects that their learning has on others. Culturally, we have made assumptions about these opposing learning styles, valuing field independence above field dependence: field independent styles of learning are considered to be more characteristic of mature adulthood than field dependent ones; they are more closely associated with traditional male values about what and how to learn than they are with feminine values; they relate more to the attitudes and beliefs of white "northern cultures" than they do to Native American or "southern cultures".

Drawing upon research on learning styles of successful self-directed learners (Danis & Tremblay, 1985; Thiel, 1984) Brookfield's findings indicate that the characteristics conducive to success were not those traditionally associated with field independent learning styles, but rather characteristics associated with field dependent learners, or "accommodators". Accommodators (Kolb, 1984) share similar qualities to those of field dependent learners; they prefer trial and error methods, or some form of active participation in their investigation of concrete experience. "Their

learning activities are placed within a social context and they cite other people as the most important learning resource. Peers and fellow learners provide information, serve as skill models, and act as reinforcers of learning and as counsellors in times of crisis." (Brookfield, 1986, p.44). Furthermore, Brookfield equates self-directed learning with the exhibition of critical reflection on the part of adults. He states that "such critical reflection is marked by an awareness of contextuality and contingency of knowledge and by an appreciation of the culturally constructed nature of value frameworks, social codes, and belief systems... and these capacities are precisely those possessed by field dependent learners" (Ibid, p. 42). Boud et al (1985) specify that the distinguishing factor which turns experience into learning enabling us to apply our learning to different contexts is the ability to reflect on our experiences. Included in their notion of reflection is the processing of feelings, values and attitudes, as well as cognitive and psycho-motor aspects of experience.

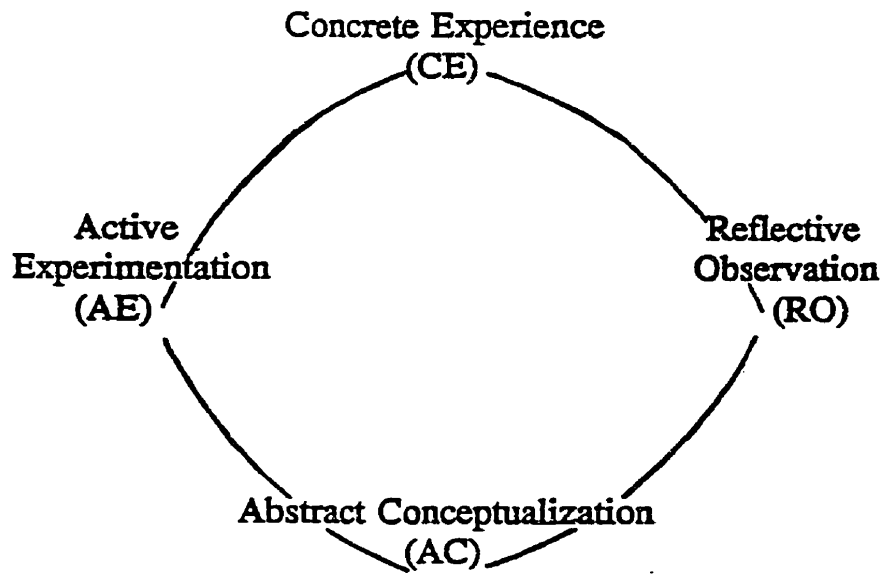
This broader perspective on being self-directed allows for the possibility that we don't necessarily have clear goals or know exactly where we're headed as adult learners - however, even without clear goals, we are still quite capable of 'learning along the way'. This illustrates a learning process in which we not only navigate through our environment drawing on whatever resources, abilities, tools and skills are available - thinking and doing - but also reflect on our experiences and observations, integrating and refining our learning experiences as we move along. This broader context acknowledges that self-directed learners can not only function with complete autonomy but also can draw upon others as resources for help and support. A sense of exploration, experimentation, organic growth and even apprehension define the process as well. Like the 'significant learning' and 'spiral learning' referred to earlier in discussing the ideas of Rogers (1994) and Bateson (1994), self-directed learners possess an extensive repertoire of cognitive, motivational, and emotional experience upon which to draw.

From this broader understanding of self-directedness as a basis for learning from experience (experiential learning), we now turn to the work of Kolb (1984) who extensively explored the role of experience in learning. He defines learning as a "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." (p.38).

> Learning is a process whereby concepts are derived from and continuously modified by experience. The fact that learning is a continuous process grounded in experience... implies that all learning is relearning. (Ibid. p.26-28)

Kolb's model (Figure 2) of the underlying structure of learning proposes that human development occurs through the process of learning from experience and integrates representations of experiential learning from four different perspectives. Although Kolb proposes the model as four stages in a cycle that must be integrated in order for learning to take place, my purpose in using this model is to provide the reader with a vocabulary which describes the diversity of experiential learning. Rather than describing these aspects exclusively from the perspective that Kolb may have intended, I am borrowing his concepts to illuminate qualities of learning revealed by the data in Chapter 4.

Figure 2 EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODEL



Starting from the top and moving in a clockwise direction, the orientation of *concrete experience* focuses on being involved in experiencing and dealing with immediate human situations in a personal way. It emphasizes feeling, a concern with the uniqueness and complexity of present reality, and an intuitive, aesthetic approach to functioning in the world.

Reflective observation focuses on understanding the meaning of ideas and situations by carefully observing them. It emphasizes understanding, reflection, and intuiting the meaning as well as seeing the implications of situations and ideas. Different points of view and perspectives are thoughtfully considered and appreciated. Quietly mulling over events in our mind or making sense of experiences through informal discussions with others, or through keeping a journal, are all notions which link back to Brookfield's perspective on self-directed learners and their capacity for critical reflection.

Abstract conceptualization focuses on the use of logic, ideas and concepts. It

emphasizes thinking, a concern for general theories, and a scientific approach to problem solving. Systematic planning, manipulation of abstract symbols and quantitative analysis are favoured means of integrating and building on experience.

Active experimentation focuses on actively influencing people and changing situations. It emphasizes practical applications, a pragmatic concern with what works, and an emphasis on doing. People with this orientation are good at getting things accomplished, are willing to take some risks to achieve objectives, and value having an impact and influence on their environment.

Kolb used this experiential learning model as a basis for determining individual learning styles, however research indicates that individual learning styles tend to change depending on the context (Jarvis, 1987), and furthermore, findings show that learning styles tend to be gender specific (Melamud & Devine, 1986). The "accommodators" discussed earlier when clarifying different self-directed learning styles, refer to a focus on active experimentation and concrete experience while learning. In their study using Kolb's experiential learning model, Melamud & Devine consider the fact that women fall into the "accommodator" quadrant as a limitation of the model to elaborate on women's unique learning abilities. Rather than considering this a limitation, for the purpose of this study, I propose exploiting the gender bias inherent in the different learning styles. As discussed earlier in the section on self-directed learning, opposing views of a concept need not be interpreted to mean that one view is superior to the other. I hope to convey the merit of opening up to a wider conception of all the possibilities inherent in these ideas - without being overly influenced by cultural biases which tend to value one learning style above another.

To the casual observer it may appear that Kolb's theory conceives of learning as primarily a personal, internal process. Such is not the case. He affirms "the

position taken in this work is similar to that of Bandura - namely, that personal characteristics, environmental influences, and behaviour all operate in reciprocal determination, each factor influencing the others in an interlocking fashion" (Kolb, 1984, p.36). Therefore, a discussion of Bandura and 'social cognitive theory' is also appropriate.

Social Learning

Keeping in mind earlier references to the literature which views the workplace as a social environment, social cognitive theory provides additional insights to understand the potentials - and limitations - for learning at work.

The term "social cognitive theory" acknowledges the social origins of human thought and action as well as the cognitive thought processes influencing our motivation and actions. Bandura (1986) analysed human motivation, thought and action from this perspective. Social cognitive theory emphasizes 'reciprocal determinism' which basically means that a reciprocal relationship and interaction exist between environmental factors, personal factors and behaviour. This concept recognizes that we are not only influenced by our environment, but also have the capacity to influence it in turn.

> The relative influence exerted... will vary for different activities, different individuals, and different circumstances. When environmental conditions exercise powerful constraints on behaviour, they emerge as the overriding determinants... when situational constraints are weak, personal factors serve as the predominant influence in the regulatory system. (p.24)

Learning from the consequences of our actions, i.e. through trial and error, is further enhanced by our capacity to learn through observing the behaviours of others. Bandura considers modelling an important mechanism by which people adopt values, ideas and social behaviours, and refers to this vicarious learning

capacity as 'plasticity'.

> ..virtually all learning phenomena, resulting from direct experience, can occur vicariously by observing other people's behaviour and its consequences for them... without having to form them gradually by tedious trial and error (Ibid, p.19)

Social cognitive theory also states that people do not behave just to suit the preferences of others; much of their behaviour is motivated and regulated by internal standards. Further, the ability to analyse experiences and reflect on thought processes impacts on people's judgements regarding their competence at dealing effectively with different realities. "It is partly on this basis of self perception of competence that people choose what to do, how much effort to invest in activities, how long to persevere, and whether tasks are approached anxiously or self-assuredly." (Ibid, p.21)

Bandura's research resonates with the several issues raised earlier. His emphasis on 'reciprocal determinism' takes into account Lennerlof's bi-polar environmental factors and the impact the workplace environment has on a worker, as well as a worker's ability to have influence within that environment. His exposition of vicarious learning in social circumstances builds upon the domain of 'reflective observation' described in Kolb's experiential learning model. Furthermore, Bandura offers us another view of the concept of competence as being motivated by internal standards. We can apply the notion of 'critical reflection' as presented by Brookfield to an individual's self perceptions and internal motivations towards competence, thus underscoring the value of investigation beneath the surface of visible behaviours.

Women's Development

During the last two decades, feminist scholars have argued that prevailing theories of adult development are limited in depicting women's developmental processes (Belenky et al, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976). They have criticized the fact that most of the research regarding adult development has been conducted with male subjects, (from children to middle-aged men) and then generalized across genders and cultures. Unfortunately, the result of such generalizing has created an environment where the qualities associated with men's "higher" developmental processes were then considered to be characteristic of "more evolved" adult development and, female subjects (from children to middle-aged women) are usually considered less developed and found lacking in comparison.

Gilligan (1982), for example, offers women (and men) an alternative 'developmental map'- suggesting that 'optimal development' need not necessarily mean ever-increasing separateness, thus causing women to reconsider the importance of striving toward a stance of detachment and abstract principle and to value those parts of themselves calling for connectedness and relationship. Gilligan challenged what she believed to be a fundamentally male bias: that growth toward greater autonomy and the ability to act separately from the demands of one's environment was a logical endpoint of development. Drawing on a wide range of resources, Gilligan argued that in contrast to the male vision of a 'hierarchy of power', women tend to view the world as 'a web of relationships'. Because of the glut of research depicting men's development, Gilligan stressed the need for research on adult development which depicts women's experiences of adult life in their own terms.

From the perspective of traditional gender roles or expectations, and interpersonal communications - several researchers have explored and analysed women's communication and affiliation patterns (Miller, 1976; Spender, 1980; Tannen,

1990). The results of their research has led to two opposing although not mutually exclusive tendencies. On the one hand, there is an interest in shedding those characteristics which tend to subjugate women, while simultaneously adopting the characteristics of the dominant male culture. On the other hand is the willingness to explore and develop all that is valuable and unique about women's interpersonal communication styles. For example, Tannen's (1990) description of the different listening styles of men and women would seem to indicate that men could learn a great deal from women on this subject alone.

Based on the premise that women acquire and value knowledge differently from men, Belenky et al (1986) set out to understand adult development from the perspective of women of all ages, cutting across cultural and socio-economic boundaries. Women commonly talked about voice and silence in describing their lives and repeatedly used the metaphor of voice to depict their intellectual and ethical development. The authors adopted the metaphor of voice and silence as a unifying theme weaving throughout the stages of women's development and their ways of knowing.

Belenky et al identify five distinct stages of development -imagine them along a continuum with silence at one extreme, and at the other extreme, a well developed, authentic 'female' voice aware of its capacity for creating knowledge. While moving from one extreme to the other, women's relationship to authority undergoes decisive changes. In the silent stage, they are usually defined by some external authority - usually male. Relationships between the sexes are stereotypical - men are dominant, decisive and active; women are submissive, passive and receptive. As women develop beyond this stage, which incidentally is not age specific, they gradually become aware of their inner resources and begin to trust an 'inner voice'. Knowledge and truth are understood as being a subjective personal experience; the emotional and intuitive realms are valued above logic. Life events or crises that

trigger this stage in the lives of women often result from a perceived failure and lack of trust in authority. Authority is redefined, shifting from external authority to the self. This developmental transition has repercussions on their relationships, self-concept, self-esteem, morality and behaviour. Many of the women who move on to the next stages are usually involved in formal learning, however the presence of benign or knowledgeable authorities are critical for the development of the voice of reason. Two patterns of knowing emerge - *separate knowing*, in which the self is experienced as separate from the objects under study; and *connected knowing*, where familiarity and contact exist between the self and the object of study based on compassionate understanding. At the 'final' developmental stage, all knowledge is understood to be contextual; women see themselves as capable creators of knowledge and they value both objective and subjective approaches to learning.

Belenky et al (1986) found that women learn best in environments where either affective forms of knowledge, or knowledge that comes from life experience is valued. In such environments women begin to recognize their own ability to think independently, to think critically, and to come to their own conclusions. It is also in these situations that women come to recognize and hear their own voices. In environments where their life experiences are validated, women begin to see themselves as creators of knowledge, and are better able to integrate subjective and objective forms of knowledge. As already discussed, experience-based learning is a foundation of adult learning theory. However, the findings of the Belenky study point out the significance of exploring and validating the learning that comes from their life experiences as women.

Lennerlof's (1989) bi-polar environmental factors are relevant in this context. It is possible to imagine that a work environment which invalidates, ignores or rejects women's unique learning experiences might contribute to restrictive learning, or 'learned helplessness', especially if women feel that regardless of their efforts and

actions they are ignored or unable to influence a favourable outcome. In the same vein, a work environment which acknowledges or values affective forms of knowledge, or knowledge that comes from their life experience - as women - would presumably support a growing sense of competence among working women.

The similarities between Belenky et al and Gilligan's research findings centre on women's developmental concerns for connectedness based on authenticity. Like the field dependent self-directed learners referred to in the earlier discussion on Brookfield (1986), women's development embodies an awareness of context and responsible interdependence.

The Role of Dialogue

The role of "dialogue" as it pertains to learning comes up often in the context of the three strands of literature discussed so far. The free and open exchange of ideas and knowledge within dominant-free social relations, is considered critical in workplace learning, adult learning, and women's development.

Welton (1993) discusses the relevance of Habermas' theory of communicative learning to the workplace, as it goes beyond mere instrumental learning and impacts on trust and interactions at work. Leymann (1989) and Argyris (1982) discuss the principle of dialogue and its potentials for supporting satisfying learning experiences and working relationships - and the lack of dialogue, or restricted dialogue, as a limiting factor in learning opportunities.

Knowles (1978) points out that dialogue is an important procedure for refining and developing knowledge among adult learners - as such, it dates back to antiquity. Indeed, the assumptions put forward in the concept of andragogy thrive in open

dialogue and discussion among learners who perceive themselves, and others, as equals. Sharing her profound experiences about adults learning all around the world, Vella (1994) comments on the powerful effectiveness of dialogue in the midst of diversity. She emphatically believes that adult learning and development is best achieved in dialogue.

Bateson (1989) believes that women in particular grow in dialogue, which often extends into collaborative learning experiences. This concept is also emphasized by Belenky et al (1986), who pointed out that women learn best when in 'community' with members capable of voicing uncertainties, and then nurturing each other's thoughts to maturity.

Weaving the Strands

All of the above strands of literature inform this study. The literature on workplace learning helps to provide a historical background and framework against which to understand evolving concepts and various perspectives on learning at work. While the literature drawing on adult learning theory, experiential learning, social cognitive theory and women's developmental stages all provide a rich background against which to understand learning as a process and its roots in everyday experience.

I have woven together these various strands of literature and theories in order to promote a deeper understanding of the meaning of the informal learning experiences the women in this study have shared with me.

Chapter 3: Method - Qualitative Research

> The selection of the method is a critical aspect of research and is usually based on what kind of information is sought, from whom and under what circumstances. It is important to recognize that methods appropriate for gathering abstract, theoretical information will not be equally appropriate for gathering subjective experience. ...the focus [should be] on data gathering methods which encourage the researcher's experience to be part of the content and the process of research.
>
> (Kirby, McKenna, 1989, pp.63-65)

Locating myself

My interest in the learning experiences of this particular group within the organization began as a result of my professional involvement in recruiting and staff development. During job interviews with support staff, I often advised those interested in their own development on various steps to consider in advancing their careers. My subsequent involvement in staff development programs brought to light some of the problems and issues related to training and learning in the workplace. As an institution we were definitely offering an admirable variety of staff development programs, but the programs in themselves often did not adequately address the learning needs or capabilities of support staff, nor did they deal with the limitations imposed by their environment.

Several phenomena surprised me due to the persistence with which they occurred. At times, training was resorted to as a panacea for sometimes unrelated problems or issues that supervisors were unwilling or unable to address. A more common occurrence was to consider training a perk, an afternoon off as a reward for good performance. In addition, there existed a noticeable lack of support for learning once the training was over, resulting in many lost opportunities to effectively integrate new knowledge or attitudes.

One occasion that epitomised all three of these tendencies to some degree, was an

annual event scheduled during 'Secretaries Week'. The American Management Association hosted a satellite conference from Professional Secretaries International. Support staff from various institutions near the downtown core were invited to attend. The event was popular, and considered an opportunity for support staff to get a "booster shot" to enhance their sense of professional identity. After an elegant lunch in sumptuous quarters, participants transferred to an auditorium for a teleconference in which distinguished speakers discussed current issues affecting secretaries throughout North America. Since the teleconference viewing alone took up most of the afternoon, only a brief discussion period at the end of the conference allowed the local population to raise some issues of interest to them. Although appreciation was often expressed for having had the opportunity to gather as a group and have access to information that bolstered their professionalism, support staff also lamented the difficulties they experienced bringing this knowledge back to their workplaces. In an unsympathetic environment, it was all too easy to relapse into old habits. Inevitably, these issues subsided only to emerge as briefly the following year.

Another observation perplexed me: learning needs were often defined for support staff by managers or supervisors. From my understanding of adult learning theories, I found this practise disquieting. A basic tenet of adult learning theory is that adults tend to learn best what they have identified as most meaningful to meet their own needs. There seemed to be little evidence of interest in discovering what support staff considered their learning needs to be, nor for that matter, any interest in discovering what they might already be learning. Pipan's (1989) comment reflected the reality of my own environment well:

> ...remarkable that the preponderance of educational programs [in the workplace] are developed without the involvement, or with only token involvement of those for whom the program is intended. (Pipan 1989, p.172)

These incidents and experiences taken together convinced me there were important issues about learning at work which were worthy of further exploration.

Access

Given the context of this study, besides my role as a researcher, I also have a personal relationship with the participants, as we work in the same institution and our paths are likely to cross again. My concern throughout the research process was that they should feel comfortable, trusting and willing to share their experiences openly, without feeling compromised. At times, I agonized over the responsibility of assuring their privacy, feeling somewhat invasive. Throughout the study I have been sensitive to the fact that the participants were more than willing to share their experiences with me. The fact that I was familiar with their setting, and that we worked in the same environment, made it possible for me to come away with more information than would have been possible otherwise. Early in the research process, I recognized the implications of doing this study in my own work environment and endeavoured to approach the study with a sense of responsibility for the combination of my knowledge and that of the participants. As Kirby & McKenna (1989) point out, doing meaningful and honourable research necessitates adherence to certain principles:

> ...the essentialness of accounting for the experience of the researcher in the research, of giving priority to the voices of the participants, of an egalitarian research process and of contextualizing the research. (p.21)

Personal Interviews: A subjective, learner-centered approach

The qualitative method, with its roots in the social sciences and ethnographic studies of people from different cultures, relies heavily on interviewing and observation as a means of gathering data. As a researcher, one develops a unique relationship with

participants in the research process. In many ways, the research process is quite personal, and the relationship open to subjective realms. In fact, researchers engaged in qualitative methodology are admonished to refrain from considering participants as 'objects' in a study. The qualitative method permits subjectivity - as long as it is accounted for - while maintaining concern for accuracy and balance in representing the views and experiences of others. As Bateson (1989) puts it when referring to the "informants" in her book, Composing a Life:

> ...the people we call "informants" are our truest colleagues. These women are not "interviewees", not "subjects" in an experiment, not "respondents" to a questionnaire... Women have been particularly interested in the notion of reflexivity, of looking inward as well as outward. Perhaps this is because we are not caught in the idea that every inspection involves an inspector and an inspectee, one inevitably dominant, the other vulnerable. (p.101-102)

Ten women were interviewed over a four-month period. Initially, I contacted women I knew personally, and who I felt would be receptive to the purposes of this study. Several other factors were kept in mind when choosing women to interview. I wanted these women's collective experiences, as a group, to represent the variety of tasks available to clerical and secretarial workers at the University. It was on this basis that I decided to interview only women who had been at the University for more than a decade. Their combined working knowledge reflects experience in both academic and administrative units; front line work with students or staff and isolated work in smaller units. As the interviews progressed, participants often suggested other colleagues they believed would be interested in participating. Originally I'd anticipated interviewing approximately twenty women, but soon realized that coming to terms with analysing the copious amount of data generated by these intense interviews, and the time frame I had to work with, meant restricting the interviews to ten participants.

The fact that I was already familiar with the environment was useful from the perspective of being able to understand many of the issues these women brought up.

Participants could more easily share their experiences with someone they knew to be familiar with the same environment. We shared common meanings. Some statements took on greater meaning, without the need to embellish - for instance: "well, you know how it is around here." when they spoke of a 'class system'. Drawing upon my understanding of the setting, I could make better sense of what they told me. At the same time I was careful not to impose my own meanings on their statements. Whenever appropriate during an interview, I would encourage participants to elaborate on their meanings, rather than making assumptions about what they meant.

In presenting the data, I am conscious that things were said during the interviews that could compromise some of the participants. In fact, participants were given the option of editing their own transcripts to exclude any data they objected to from the final study. Consistently, they were less concerned about my use of the data than they were about their anonymity. My regular assurances that confidentiality was a cornerstone for this research process allowed them the freedom to be open and honest about their experiences. And consequently, the names and identifying characteristics of participants and informants in this study have been changed or merged.

Since I was interested in these women's impressions of what they were learning, as well as the content, the qualitative approach with its emphasis on interviewing, and subsequent analysis of themes that emerge, suits the purpose of this study well (Measor, 1988). I developed a set of questions that would serve as a guideline to discover the meanings these women attributed to their learning experiences. As participants began to share their experiences, I would often ask additional questions, following upon what they said. I would ask for details, or request that they 'tell me the story' within a context so that I could better understand the meaning they attributed to the experience. I consider this a 'learner-centered' approach to

interviewing. As such, it mirrors my interest in adult learning and women's development, which is at the heart of this study. Seidman (1991) cautions researchers to use interview guides with reserve: "In depth interviewing is not designed to test hypotheses, gather answers to questions, or corroborate opinions. Rather, it is designed to ask participants to reconstruct their experience and to explore their meaning. The questions most used in an in-depth interview follow from what the participant has said." (p.69) Saran (1988) describes the unstructured interview as both non-directive and conversational. She does however maintain that it is a conversation with a purpose. The non-directive approach allows for a flexible, freer, response, and "allows for the modification of questions or even pursuit of new and unexpected topics, provided they are relevant". (p.221)

After the first few interviews, I recognized that part of the dynamic unfolding during the interview process was a validation of these women's informal learning experiences. Participants often were not immediately aware of the scope of their day to day learning encounters. The interview process was an opportunity for them to verbalize what was happening for them implicitly on a day- to-day basis - and have it validated as well. As Bateson (1994) points out, "most people are unaware of the intricate structure of what they have learned from participation, of the intellectual complexity of common sense..." (p.150).

> Conscientization and consciousness raising are terms used for the empowering growth of awareness of how society really works. They might equally be used of the intellectually empowering process of becoming aware of the range and depth of knowledge acquired through participation and observation. (Ibid.)

Initial responses to questions were often pensive: "that's a good question, I've never thought about it much" or, "that's funny, I was just thinking along those lines the other day." They frequently expressed satisfaction for having the opportunity to describe their learning experiences to me, and were often astonished at the wide range of common everyday experiences that could be considered "learning". The

habit of critical reflection - questioning their own assumptions, and then re-evaluating and validating their experiences was evidenced regularly as participants reconsidered their actions and impressions in different situations. The interview process was an occasion for research subjects to explore their ideas about learning as well as simply report them.

Referring to Dale Spender's research, DeVault (1986) comments on the special features of 'woman talk', with its emphasis on listening. Highly skilled at listening, "women interviewing women bring to the interview a tradition of 'woman talk'. They know how to help each other develop ideas, and are typically better prepared than men to use the interview as a 'search procedure', cooperating in the project of constructing meanings together ...involving the recovery of unarticulated experience." (p.6)

The qualitative approach allows the incorporation of my knowledge of the environment during interviews, and acknowledges that participants could ask me questions as well. Seidman (1991) says that "interviewing is both a research methodology and a social relationship" (p.72) and talks about the creation of a full "we" relationship during interviews.

> "I try to strike a balance, saying enough about myself to be alive and responsive but little enough to preserve the autonomy of the participant's words and to keep the focus of attention on his or her experience rather than mine." (p.73)

Oakley (1981) argued that there is 'no intimacy without reciprocity', and challenged traditional criteria of interviewing research as manipulative and reflective of a predominantly masculine, hierarchical model of sociology and society. She insisted "that the mythology of 'hygienic' research with its accompanying mystification of the research and the researched as objective instruments of data production be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias -

it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives". (p.58)

One woman shared events which had occurred earlier in the day with her supervisor; she was obviously distressed and because of the timing of our interview, needed a sounding board to sort out some of her feelings. Struggling with her own understanding of "assertiveness", she took the opportunity to ask me what I thought it meant. Although conscious of the process in which we were engaged, I recognized an opportunity for dialogue that might reveal a deeper understanding of her experiences. I chose to respond to her question, and at the same time used the opportunity to explore more about her own understanding of assertiveness. If my approach to data gathering had been exclusively through a survey, or by following the questions in a strictly structured manner, I would not have gained access to the same depth of experience.

Issues of Validity and Generalizability

Validity generally refers to the trustworthiness or reliability of a research study. It has traditionally been defined with reference to experimental research designs in terms of the logic and technically appropriate processes used to conduct a study with accuracy. However, the growing trend in the social sciences towards non-experimental, or qualitative research methods has created the need for a broader conception of the term. From a qualitative perspective, there is less interest in scientifically accurate findings than there is in presenting a meaningful, trustworthy account of the world represented. The careful design of a study, how it is conducted and presented, its sensitivity to human subjects, and how it contributes to important issues, theories or practices, all reinforce its "validity" (Eisenhart & Borko, 1993, p.93).

In any study, the researcher makes decisions about which information to consider relevant, and which to leave out; these are qualitative decisions, even in research which endeavours to be 'objective'. While conducting and writing up this study, I have made such decisions based on my understanding of the process, the literature, and my concern to provide a coherent and balanced picture of the experiences shared by the women in their interviews. I've come to a better understanding of those areas where I get "caught up" in their stories, where I might lose some objectivity. I have also come to a better understanding of which aspects of the stories need telling, in an emotionally detached manner, despite personal feelings. I concur with Kirby & McKenna (1989):

> When we engage in research we involve ourselves in a process in which we construct meaning. Because the social world is multifaceted (i.e. the same situation or experience is able to give us many different kinds of knowledge), when we 'do research' we involve ourselves in a process of revealing 'possible knowledges'. What knowledge we are able to observe and reveal is directly related to our vantage point, to where we stand in the world. Our interaction with the world is affected by such variables as gender, race, class, sexuality, age, physical ability, etc. This does not mean that facts about the social world do not exist, but that what we see and how we go about constructing meaning is a matter of interpretation. (p.25)

The issue of generalizability is concerned with how findings obtained in one study can be applied to other similar situations. Given the purpose of this study, it was not my intention to create a picture which could be replicated elsewhere. Rather, I hoped to provide a vivid portrayal of the diverse impressions of this group of working women at a particular place and point in time. Each woman provided a unique point of view about her learning at work; I searched for the places that resonated among those views. In different ways, each story yielded insights not only about these women, but about how other working women may also function within a contemporary workplace.

In her book, Composing a Life, Bateson (1989) effectively addresses this issue of generalizability:

> These are not representative lives. They do not constitute a statistical sample -- only, I hope, an interesting one. As I have worked over the material, I have become aware that the portions of these life histories that interest me most are the echoes from one life to another, the recurrent common themes. We need to look at multiple lives to test and shape our own... I have never looked for single role models. I believe in the need for multiple models, so that it is possible to weave something new from many different threads. (p.16)

Relevance of the study

This study would probably be relevant to a work environment where there is some sense of continuity, where the notion of employment security, or employability security - that is, opportunities to continue learning in the same institution - is part of the workplace contract.

It is likely that the findings of this study would have relevance for other workplace settings with similar working conditions. Many of the issues facing these workers would presumably be similar in other educational institutions. Certainly within the province of Quebec, the general concern for parity among employees from similar institutions would make this study relevant to them. Besides large educational institutions such as CEGEPs, colleges and universities, other public service institutions such as hospitals, libraries, or CLSCs would find this study relevant. This is not a study that is "statistically generalizable" to any other population but it does nevertheless have broad relevance for other similar workplaces.

Revealing Questions

> When interviewers ask what something was like for participants, they are giving them the chance to reconstruct their experience according to their own sense of what was important, unguided by the interviewer. (Seidman, 1991, p.63)

The issues raised by Lennerlof formed the basis for many of the questions asked during the interviews. Originally, I started with ten questions. Additional questions were incorporated after listening carefully to some of the issues raised in the first two interviews. Questions were open ended, focusing on the subjective experiences of participants. The fourteen questions I eventually used as an interview guideline follow, along with my reasons for incorporating or discarding them during each interview.

Because my overall interest is in adult learning and specific to this context, how these women learn in their workplace, the first question focused on getting participants to define learning at work - from their own perspective.

1. How do you define learning at work?

Their personal definition of learning was key to both the purpose and method in this study. Although reactions to this first question varied, the reflective process was started, setting the tone for the rest of the interview. Throughout the interview, additional information would be related back to their definitions, and their experiences, to confirm or enhance the meanings they attributed to them and to highlight any contradictions if they arose. Subsequent questions provided an opportunity to explore personal meanings more deeply.

2. Describe your best learning experience at work.
3. What was your worst learning experience at work?

What I wanted to explore with these open questions were those experiences participants considered most meaningful to their development. An interesting

correlation developed, perhaps because these questions were asked one after the other. Participants sometimes referred to the same event as both their best and worst learning experience, alerting me to the complexities they had encountered. This forced me to ask additional questions to help clarify how participants could perceive the same learning experience as the best - and the worst. "Best" learning experiences were often described in terms of having a positive, long term impact on competence and self confidence, while the "worst" learning experiences were a result of coping with distressing or trying circumstances. As it turned out, experiences that combined the full spectrum had a profound impact on learning. I venture to say this was so because the learning occurred on several levels, cognitive, motivational and emotional.

4. What motivates you at work?
5. What de-motivates you?

Taking into account Lennerlof's (1989) reference to motivation as one of three consequences of bi-polar environmental factors, I believed this question would contribute to a better understanding of the meanings they attributed to their learning experiences. These questions invariably led to further exploration of the circumstances and situations based on each participant's response.

6. Do you believe you have influence over your working conditions? If so, how? If not, why not?

I asked participants whether they believed they had any influence over their working conditions, and to elaborate on their initial response because this notion came up consistently in research findings - workers who feel they have some influence over their working conditions have much more positive and qualitatively different learning experiences compared to those who don't.

7. How have your learning experiences at work contributed to your development as a person?

Besides providing an opportunity to elaborate on some of the questions that had gone before, this question allowed participants to describe the impact their development at work had on other aspects of their lives or vice versa.

8. How have computers affected your work? Describe the effect automation has had on what you learn, how you learn it, when, with whom, where?

Within the context of this study, and based on my knowledge of this workplace environment, I was interested in discovering more about the impact that technology was having on the skills and knowledge of support staff. Had technology created a greater demand on a wider range of abilities? With this question I wanted to find out more about whether de-skilling, or up skilling was occurring in this setting as a result of automation.

The next question originated with the Lennerlof article as well. I gauged whether or not it would be appropriate to ask based on the level of self disclosure I felt participants were comfortable with at this point in the interview.

9. Can you describe a time when you felt depressed or passive about work? ...a time when you "played the system", or resisted? What led to these feelings? How did you handle it?

Where I felt more confident that a participant might be willing to discuss such a matter, I did bring it up. On one occasion, taking this risk was counter-productive - I sensed a closing off, and change in voice and demeanor to a more "public voice". I moved on to another question. At other times I was completely surprised when someone grasped the opportunity, and candidly shared a range of personal and private experiences that probably would not have surfaced had I not taken the risk and asked this question.

The idea of 'listening on several levels' while interviewing, was particularly evident as a result of asking this question. Seidman (1991) talks about listening for the

'inner voice' as opposed to the more 'public voice'. "The outer, or public voice is not untrue, it is guarded - aware of an audience. By taking participants' language seriously without making them feel defensive about it, interviewers can encourage a level of thoughtfulness more characteristic of inner voice." (p.57)

If these issues had not already surfaced as a result of previous questions, I would ask -

10. What kinds of changes have you adapted to at work over the last three to five years?
11. What do you consider to be ideal elements to support your learning at work?
12. What do you consider detrimental to your learning at work?

Again, the foregoing were questions that I would only resort to if I felt that we had not touched upon them earlier, or if we had skimmed over them earlier, and this provided an opportunity for clarification.

13. Describe someone at work whose behaviour you've used as a model for yourself. What was the behaviour you wanted to emulate?
14. Talk about behaviour you've observed that you try to avoid.

The questions above were added after the second interview. The first two participants left me with vivid impressions of their learning experience being based on their powers of observation. These women paid considerable attention to their environment, and the interactions of people within it. In their personal exchanges as well as their observations of exchanges between other people, they drew on considerable data, showing a high degree of sensitivity to tone of voice, facial expressions, and mood as part of interpersonal communications.

I reviewed my notes of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, in which he points out that we learn not only from our personal experiences, but also from our observations of other's experiences as well, thus supporting the notion that we

continue learning within a social context. Although I started with the more positive approach - 'What kind of behaviour would you emulate? - participants often found it easier to begin by describing behaviours they would prefer to avoid and then work their way back to behaviours they would emulate. Within the context of these questions, issues regarding participants' learning experiences with their bosses would surface in considerable detail. This provided an opportunity to explore participants' experiences with their supervisors and their views on power relations in a workplace context.

As will become evident in the data chapter and conclusion that follow, participants' responses to these questions yielded a rich and variegated tapestry of meaningful learning experiences and processes.

Chapter 4: On the Job - The Interview Data

> ... in understanding the worker we must see her actions as the outcome of her perceptions of the various options open to her and of which alternative best meets her priorities at the time...
>
> (Mills & Simmons, 1995, p.141)

During the interviews, different patterns of experience surfaced - some were more diverse and unique, while other experiences were commonly shared. As the interviews progressed, I began to concentrate on the more pronounced patterns, without entirely ignoring the more subtle or peripheral. Delamont's (1991) counsel came to mind, that "much of the force of qualitative argument comes from drawing our attention to contrasts and highlighting paradoxes to make the audience look afresh at social phenomena" (p.161).

The various themes elaborated in this chapter are based on participants' definitions and observations about learning at work. By encouraging them to define learning on their own terms, I was drawing on the notions held among humanist and social theorists that it is the significant and meaningful learning experiences in our lives that shape who we are, influencing our behaviour and actions. The themes as presented are not entirely exclusive, some overlap exists. Rather than seeing each theme as separate and distinct, these stories are better approached as interwoven threads of an intricate tapestry.

Although unique, each participant's experiences cannot be separated out of their context - a reciprocal relationship exists. As the personal stories unfold, clearly the context cannot speak for itself, but only through the impressions of these women - after all it is their perceptions of the environment that provide meaning to their learning experiences. From this study's point of view, making such a choice was intentional since the voices of these women are often silent within the workplace. To help make better sense of the data I compared my observations with that of key

informants in the environment. Through informal discussions with colleagues I was able to clarify and verify the context out of which much of the data was percolating. Throughout this chapter I draw upon these collective observations to ground the participants' perceptions to the context whenever possible.

Our exploration of the terrain begins with Joan's statement of astonishment after approximately half an hour into the interview:

> I start thinking about all the things I've learned - it's quite a lot. I never think that I know very much, until someone asks me questions. I guess the more you have to do, the more you learn... it expands, there's no walls that stop it - you can keep learning.

Doing What Needs to be Done

In defining what learning meant to them personally, support staff often described situations in which they were alone, with no one accessible to help or guide them - no one to explain how the work was to be done. This usually marked a turning point - a stage where they had left behind the familiar routines of a previous assignment to take on new responsibilities or roles. They would do their best to match available resources to the situation at hand. Whether drawing upon personal skills and abilities, or whatever resources were immediately available, they would plunge forward and "do what had to be done". The theme of self-directedness was evident in a variety of situations. On their own, they learned to develop competencies for prioritizing, structuring work around periodic cycles or unexpected events, dealing with constant interruptions or dealing with people, and often figuring things out by trial and error.

Janice described her first few months in a new position. Having outgrown her previous job in an administrative unit, she applied for a new position where she

would have more exposure to the academic and research milieu. Along with her excitement about taking on new responsibilities and adjusting to a different environment, she experienced significant anxiety about whether she had the necessary abilities to do the job. Lacking direction or guidance, she had to devise a way to make the most of every opportunity for learning that presented itself. She felt that presenting herself as "totally ignorant" would make others more tolerant of her need to write down every word and this became her means to gather information in her new environment. Using this process she gradually became attuned to her new setting and the people in it, and it helped her overcome an anxious stage in her career. Although she did not know where this strategy would lead, she risked appearing "stupid", and found the process worked well for her.

> ...when I first took this job I was in a field that I knew nothing about... I thought, I must have lost my mind what am I doing? ...I'm not capable... not qualified. I remember having knots in my stomach every day. I felt intimidated because my knowledge was so limited. I had to learn, and fast... by listening and asking questions. I was just a bundle of nerves. I had to do everything and do it well, I had to know everything that was going on, because there was nobody else looking after anything. Meanwhile... I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do.
>
> I had no choice... I had nobody to tell me what to do, how to go about it... there was no structure. It was make up your own structure as you go... and not something I was used to. My experience until then was so uniform, so structured.

Several participants commented on this element of making up your own structure as you went along. "Being thrown to the wolves" or "thrown into the deep end" were typical metaphors used to describe the early adjustments to new conditions. With little if any guidance, they would find their own way often enduring anxiety in the process.

Suzanne's case was more typical of women who had worked in the same office for many years before taking on a completely new range of duties within the same department. For years Suzanne was happy with her job in a front line capacity.

Along with her routine tasks attending to correspondence, record keeping, and scheduling for an Associate Dean, she honed her organizational skills and remained highly productive while dealing with the constant interruptions inherent in serving students' daily needs. After many years, the workload gradually increased to a level Suzanne found trying. She was becoming short tempered. Realizing she was answering students' questions before they had even finished asking them, she forced herself to listen and pay attention all over again. During a period of more than usual staff turnover, Suzanne realized her own workload would only increase again, since she was now the only one left to pick up the slack. She'd had enough. Spurred on by her frustrations, she decided to ask for, and received, a promotion within her own unit, doing work that was partially related to her previous job, but with new responsibilities to master as well. Even in these fairly familiar surroundings, Suzanne commented:

> ...they throw you to the wolves. When I took on the new position... there was no transition period. There's no time to be instructed on how to do the job in any of the capacities here ...which can make things very tense and very confusing.

Suzanne felt she had to do everything perfectly. Since she did not yet understand enough about the 'system', she had no sense of what kind or level of mistakes were allowable. She learned most of her new tasks through trial and error while experiencing considerable tension within.

> I thought everything had to be 100% accurate and if something went wrong my head was going to be on the block... people don't have time to train you... to explain all the ins and outs. They assume you'll just learn it. And yes, you do learn it but it would be really helpful to avoid some unnecessary anxiety. Then I would feel bad about myself because of the way I reacted... I wasn't behaving very professionally. So... trial and error... experience.

> ...we do that a lot, we tell people "ask questions, the only way you're going to learn is to ask questions." That presupposes that there's somebody there to answer them. If there's nobody there to answer them... well, common sense helps... I think it's an essential element in learning any kind of work.

To Suzanne, common sense meant "not panicking and getting your priorities straight"; although she added that tense or stressful situations interfered with her ability to draw upon her own common sense. Elaborating on 'getting your priorities straight' she continued:

> ...you look for material that could give you the answers... see how a particular question might have been answered. It's looking for anything that will give you a handle as to how the situation should be dealt with and where the information is. So if it's not a person, look for information... a file, a book, calendars - anything. I think it's a little bit different in an academic environment... where similar problems come up every session. There's physical information there... you just have to look through it and familiarize yourself with deadlines... with the terminology and the work processes.

Finding their own way, while gradually developing a sense of competence about their new responsibilities, both Janice and Suzanne described feelings of tension and self-doubt. In retrospect, they marvel at what they've accomplished given their feelings of inadequacy at the time. Our conversation became enlivened, and their sense of pride at having overcome an obstacle on their own was palpable. Looking back, they would laugh at their earnest desire to "do what had to be done - perfectly", and how that contributed to some of their anxiety at the time.

Evelyn was full of excitement and enthusiasm while she described her best learning experience as the point in her career where she moved from being told what to do, to figuring out things on her own.

> It forced me to examine the kind of person I was and how I worked. I had to fend for myself. I had to know, could I do it? Could I go inside myself and pick out the stuff that I needed? Could I figure out - how do I solve this problem? Go there, and if the door was closed, go somewhere else and not just sit down and give up. I proved to myself I could do it. I found out I was resourceful. It was very good for my confidence and self assurance.
>
> Everything was new - all of a sudden, you're not just working within your own universe. You were being bombarded. You had to learn to jump from one thing to the other very quickly. You're thinking about accounting one minute and the next minute you get a call requesting something - so you

had to jump into another mode of thinking. It was just channelling energy where it was required at that specific time.

Joan brought additional perspective to this phenomenon of 'learning on the job'. Due to her many years of experience in the workforce, both at the University and prior to working here, she was able to compare 'on-the-job training' across institutions.

> ...in other places I had a training period and I learned about my job before starting it... they had a training system for everybody, depending on where they think you're going to go. You would never go into a job without someone being there to train you for a while. My experience here is that I got dropped into it as I went along.

Joan commented on some of the realities unique to this environment, where support staff could be in a situation with no one above them to show them the ropes. In many of the smaller units, it is often the support staff who "train" the new Chairman in administrative procedures. Since it is customary to rotate this function every few years among academics within a department, this convention is not uncommon.

> I'm sure this isn't the case everywhere because there's certainly jobs where the supervisor knows the job and would be there to help train them. But if you end up the highest clerical or secretarial person in a small office where there's only one or two of you... there's nobody above you. And if you work for a chair where they change all the time... you're the one that knows the job. You're the one that has to train them when they come in. So, it's a 'teach yourself as you go along' proposition.

The conditions under which these women acquire their learning experiences has a way of turning some notions upside down. Not only do they fend for themselves, doing what needs to be done, making the best of a situation - even in unfamiliar territory - but sometimes, what needs doing - is to train the boss.

In Chapter 5, the implications of 'doing what has to be done' will be discussed in greater detail. For now suffice it to say that this data challenges some assumptions

about the way work is organized, how support staff learn, and who learns what from whom in this workplace setting.

Creating Order

Once familiar with the procedures, tasks, and rhythms of their work and environment, support staff begin to consider making some changes, at least to whatever degree is within their control. In the interests of streamlining procedures, doing things more efficiently, or co-ordinating tasks, some of the participants described a tendency to challenge themselves by finding better, more creative or efficient ways of doing things. Indeed this tendency towards creating order finds its ultimate expression as support staff master technology in their environment (which will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter). Taking the time to reflect on their flow of work, they begin to systematize processes. While discussing what motivated her at work, Suzanne commented:

> I've finally come to realize and accept that I am an organized person... that's very important in this particular job. I plan and organize and get things structured and set up and ready, so that there's no surprises, and if there are surprises - they're easier to deal with. It's like a game - how can I cut corners - save money - and still have it run efficiently. I enjoy that.

Alerting us to the way this phenomenon can become appropriated within organizations, Jackson (1994b) provides an interesting twist on the way this 'skill' comes to be defined. Seeing clerical workers as "originators of order and routine, rather than as compliant with an order dictated by others" (p.345) represents a definite break with conventional views about the workings of organizational hierarchies.

For those support staff who felt some degree of confidence in what they were doing, their sense of responsibility and effectiveness grew as they implemented changes

within accepted parameters. Their willingness to experiment and take initiative increased. Their conversation takes on a self-assured tone, and they make it obvious that they have the support and approval of those above them.

> No one has to tell me, 'this has to be done'. No one ever told me how to organize my work or what had priority. I always did that. And, in many cases, I was given the okay to make decisions. I have complete autonomy - over how I do my job and what I do on each day. I could just be very fortunate. In this position there's a tremendous amount of responsibility, but a tremendous amount of autonomy as well. My supervisor doesn't worry, because she knows I can do it. I usually pass things to her after the fact.

This aspect of 'creating order' seemed related to the notion of 'having time' - an issue that several participants identified as important for their effectiveness at work. Having time to experiment, explore, discuss with co-workers, or listen carefully to the real needs of a student was often traded off in order to 'get work done'. Several participants felt that their heavy workload sometimes interfered with being effective at what they considered most important in their jobs. Without a backup person to replace them, those who were the sole support staff in an area felt they could ill afford to indulge efforts at concentrated attention. As a result some participants had developed a 'catch it where you can' attitude towards learning, thus never fully integrating what or how something was learned. As will be seen later in this chapter, the learning experiences participants describe in the context of "my time as my own", "having time to play around", "taking time to do things properly", "taking time to listen" are significantly more responsive to context and people compared to situations where they say "we all have less and less time" or "I don't mind more work, if I have the time to do it".

Paying Attention: Reflecting on Self, Reflecting on Others

> I have learned a lot by watching people and observing how they deal with situations, with students... both good and bad. I try to take the positive aspects. Like being polite, taking the time to listen. (Suzanne)

The powers of observation demonstrated by all the participants was altogether striking. These women notice what's going on between people in their environment. The fact that this quality was so prevalent made me realize how central a role observation plays in developing their interpersonal skills and in their learning styles generally. Not only are they extremely aware of other people's behaviours and moods, they are also aware of being observed by others. As Marie put it: "I may see myself as one way, but that doesn't mean everybody else does." They often spoke in terms of reflecting on their own, and others' behaviour. Because of their frequent exposure to all kinds of people, they recognized the significance of listening carefully and communicating clearly.

When I asked Marie how she would define learning at work, without hesitation, she emphasized the interpersonal domain.

> ...it is dealing with people. People are in our everyday lives, no matter who or what we are. We always have some kind of interaction. I think technical experience - word processing, computers, that's fine and great to learn. But I think the people skills are really important and we can only continue to develop and grow in that area.

Marie characterized the acquisition of interpersonal skills as being "reciprocal". In her interactions with others she recognized she was not just learning from the other person, but also learning about herself. She had also observed that a time lag often existed in learning about self and others; this was an ongoing process, and it did not produce immediate or fixed results. Marie's observation echoes Bateson's (1994) description of the significance of 'spiral learning' in everyday experience.

> ...it may only occur later on. I may think about my day, and think, 'why did I react that way?' Perhaps it would have been better if I had... It's not just learning from having the interaction - I also learn about myself. And if there's something I see that I'm not really proud of, it is not a forgotten thing. I may not even realize it right away. It can be a week down the road or something just might strike me: "this happened... and why? Have I reacted as I think I should have? Did I jump too fast?"

> When I look back on some of the experiences I've had - say I may have reacted one way in a difficult situation - down the road - I'm prepared when the next difficult situation comes up. I'm not as quick to react or get emotional. I listen before I open my mouth. I've learned that sometimes you pay consequences for fast reactions. Before getting caught up in the moment, I kind of sit back, reflect, and then do the best I can after weighing each situation. It's a continuous process. It has made me more self-assured, more confident. We always learn. There's no definite time frame. We're never fully there.

It was obvious from her narrative that Marie used her experiences as an opportunity to reflect critically on her own behaviour, while maintaining an ongoing willingness to make adjustments. Marie felt that the feedback she had received from colleagues had significantly contributed to her development.

> ...the feedback I've gotten from my colleagues, be it my peers or my supervisors - that's been something to make me aware that other people also observe me. Sometimes we're in our own little shell. Just because I see myself as one way, doesn't mean everybody else does.

With years of experience behind her to draw upon, Erika's perspective on learning to deal with people through observation was very matter of fact and nonchalant - almost taken for granted.

> ...relations with people and all that stuff - you live long enough without getting murdered - you pick those things up. They're common sense. Diplomacy - how to speak to people and how to get information. When you hang around for years you know where and how to find information.

Suzanne's description of circumstances where she was confronted with the constant stimulation of dealing with people all day long, illustrates the experience of many support staff working in front line capacities. They are regularly tested as they learn to balance between listening to others attentively, while maintaining some sense of equilibrium.

> You have no idea how important it is to have a door you can close. We [front line staff] are the first ones that people see - there's no barrier. They're always coming in, a hundred a day... with every type of problem. There's no privacy and constant interruption and no place to go to. You

> have to learn to cope, you've got this constant exposure to different people reacting to things in different ways - and tremendous stimuli all over the place, some of it bad, some of it good.

Although support staff often spoke with appreciation for being in an environment where they were dealing with people, particularly students, there was another side to this interaction which was not so pleasant. Dealing with the public could also be tremendously demanding at times. Suzanne pointed out some issues as they can only be seen from the perspective of those who work with students daily.

> ..they always talk about "the student is the important person". But we all have less and less time. And we're becoming automated, so there's less one-on-one. At this point, when you have one-on-one, the student is usually really upset. Otherwise, they could look after it - by computer, telephone, or voicemail. So, you need skills to be able to deal with aggression - or tears. We have everything - tears, suicide... it's hard for us to handle. You learn on the job - everything is based on experience... just going through it. It's not in any manual.

Suzanne felt that training should be provided to staff who deal with the public extensively to learn about handling aggression. She had been through a very difficult experience with a student a number of years ago, which still left her visibly shaken as she recounted the incident. Even though she had been supported by her boss, Suzanne had admonished herself and resolved to go out of her way to be helpful as a result of that experience.

> There's a tremendous amount of aggression and anger from students and parents. No matter how much you try to be polite, there are times when you snap or you say the wrong thing, or it's misinterpreted, or you had a busy day and you don't have time to listen and you might not be as receptive.
>
> There were so many people, I didn't always have time to listen. Then I realized, it's not really fair. I don't like it if I go up to speak to someone and they have no time for me. So I would really make a conscious effort to be attentive and help them. It made my job more interesting and the students didn't seem quite as belligerent or defensive.

Listening to Communicate

Admitting this was "a hard one to learn", Suzanne recognized a change in her behaviour patterns. She had learned to behave in ways that were quite opposite from her natural inclination to be impatient at times.

> It is very important to listen... I'm a very impatient person sometimes and I'm finding it's much more rewarding if you actually take the time. It doesn't matter if you have a pile of work. This person needs to talk. You might think you know what they're talking about, but they're talking about something else - and if you listen to it, you can help them with the real problem.

Listening came more easily to Joan. From her years of working in a customer service capacity before joining the University, she valued her wide range of skills in dealing with the public. She laughed as she recalled one of her first jobs, while still a student. Working as a salesclerk in the women's accessories section of a department store, Joan had been taught how to cater to customers by making them feel special. If a customer purchased a pair of gloves, every salesclerk knew how to encourage the customer to consider, say, a scarf to go with it. Joan was quite successful at this, and got a big kick out of challenging herself by serving customers in this way.

In her case, Joan saw the qualities of listening patiently as integral to her service orientation and being professional on the job. Based on her experience, active listening supported effective communication. Witnessing professors being short with students, or staff who were not helpful, made her wince; "What's the University for if it is not about dealing with people?". She also admitted however, that the very fact that one was dealing with so many different people on a regular basis sometimes made it difficult to remain professional. Nevertheless, she had learned not to compromise on this principle if she could help it.

> I think it's important to take time to learn to do things properly... even when you're rushed - especially when you're dealing with people. If you're

> telling them about something they have to do, make sure you tell them the proper way to do it. Take the time. Arrange for them to come back later, set up an appointment or whatever, if you're too busy. Because sometimes you don't explain something properly and it creates problems further down the line, and you've got to start all over again.

Several participants echoed Joan's sage advice. They recognized that, if nothing else, courtesy and clarity in communications reduced the likelihood of confusion all around. And, it provided a sense of purpose and meaning to their work.

Not all the participants in this study work directly with students and faculty. For those who do, the intricacies of communicating with people from other cultures often played a critical role in their learning at work. The importance of listening and communicating clearly was magnified even more when dealing with people from different cultural backgrounds. Without the benefit of shared meanings, or, sometimes unfortunately - unwittingly becoming enmeshed in opposite meanings across cultures - interpersonal contacts could become volatile. I recalled hearing about an incident several years ago. Women support staff functioning in an advisory capacity to foreign students applying to the University, were experiencing difficulties with some of the male students. In those cultures where women are rarely seen 'advising' men, having an information clerk 'help' you was seen by these students as an affront. Face to face culture clash. I bring up this example here because it illustrates very starkly the fact that resolutions to such problems are neither easy nor immediate.

Commenting on the fact that people from different cultures had different expectations of women in the role of support staff, Erika not only recognized the importance of being clear to minimize misunderstanding, she also believed that diplomacy mixed in with some assertiveness helped. This knowledge only came over time. In her department, she had dealt with several visiting professors of European origin over the years.

> They have different ideas of what a secretary should be. You've got to be very diplomatic, because they are very nice people, but they come from a place where each professor has their own personal gofer. Different cultures have different ways.

In her daily work, Joan dealt with foreign students and faculty from various parts of the world. She obviously enjoyed the challenge of finding some common ground for communicating and showed sensitivity to their efforts to make adjustments to our culture.

> You learn a lot about other countries and other cultures and how to deal with... what's the word I want? well, the way people act and react because they come from a different culture. They don't act the way we do about certain situations, so you have to change your behaviour sometimes to make them feel comfortable. But generally speaking, that's something you teach yourself... that you get from seeing how they react to the way you treat them. Because certainly nobody teaches you how to do that. You learn so much about different cultures, getting a much wider appreciation of people. It's a whole new environment for them, and so, you're giving them a lot of help and information, but in return you're learning a lot from them - about their social customs and habits.

Relationships with Authority and Exercising Influence

> "We need more research on how people learn about influence and control, i.e. how they learn about forces acting on the world and on themselves and about gaining control over present and future circumstances to thus avoid helplessness. (Lennerlof, 1989, p.26)

While analyzing the interview data, I kept in mind the importance of looking not just at individual psychology and individual learning styles, but also about how those things intersected with the way work was organized in this setting. From my readings, I had learned that the very way that work is structured, the way reporting relationships are decided, has more to do with institutional processes and the nature of organizations, than it has to do with the individual (Galbraith et al, 1993; Mills & Simmons, 1995). My observations about these women's learning experiences became more focused on the interaction between their experiences and their settings.

What elements in their setting stood out as enhancing or interfering with their learning? Though these women consistently spoke of 'dealing with people' as being the source of their most valued learning, it was their relationships with supervisors that stood out in sharp relief against this peopled background.

The notion of feeling competent, in the sense described by Lennerlof (1989), has definite connections to the relationship support staff have with their supervisor. Although feelings of competence are not exclusively rooted in this relationship, there was sufficient evidence that pointed to recognizable patterns between relations with supervisors and women's feelings of competence. The differences in demeanour when these women spoke about a supervisor who was supportive, who respected, acknowledged and valued what they were doing, who shared information openly, as opposed to a supervisor who treated them as expendable simpletons - "your job is to do the photocopying - you're not here to think" was remarkable. Listening to their descriptions, I noticed the way their body langauge and voices either became animated and self assured when describing positive relationships, or indifferent and resigned - if not offended, or angry, when describing difficult relations.

After reviewing the data several times, I was struck by the fact that I could vividly recall the body language accompanying their accounts. It spoke volumes. At one extreme were the animated and self assured gestures and voices of women who radiated a sense of control over their lives. At the other extreme was a numb expression - voice often lowered, conversation halting, often seeking clarification of questions, surprised that anyone might be interested in their perceptions about anything related to work. How was I to make sense of this? How could I present this material so that it might make sense to others? Looking again at the framework I had adapted from Lennerlof's article, gave me some ideas. I might approach the issue from a viewpoint he proposes. Which conditions contribute to ongoing

development, and an increased sense of competency for support staff? Which conditions impede development? How is the sense of competency diminished? Looking at the data from the perspective of these questions, I was able to place my observations along a continuum - and a pattern emerged.

To illustrate the distinctive patterns of learning that surfaced among these women, it will help to characterize the supervisors' role as representing one of three styles: 1) participative, 2) laissez-faire, or 3) authoritarian. It is not my intention to imply that any one style was used exclusively by anyone, but rather to point out: when one style dominates within a given relationship, it has a qualitatively different impact on the learning experiences of these women.

Within the participative style, interpersonal interactions with the supervisor centred on open dialogue, shared information and a felt sense that support staff were contributors to a bigger picture, as part of a team. Participants spoke of the quality of their learning in ways that emphasized their sense of being valued and respected. Their relationships with their bosses were characterized by a high degree of trust and mutual respect which they found enriching and highly motivating.

The most commonly described interactions with supervisors fell into the 'laissez-faire' category. In these cases, the supervisor usually had other pressing matters to attend to. Consequently their supervisory style was very much 'hands off', albeit with expectations that 'things would be taken care of'. How this would be achieved was left to the discretion of these women. The fact that this style seemed prevalent is probably reflective of the environment. Many of these women work in academic settings where their supervisors have teaching and research responsibilities as well. Supervisors would sign whatever documents or correspondence had been prepared, but it was often the support staff who attended to the day-to-day decisions that helped things run smoothly. Curiously, support staff who had experienced various

styles of supervision tended to prefer the laissez-faire approach. Upon further exploring this observation, I discovered it linked back to their sense of autonomy and self-directedness. With several years of experience behind them, they were usually quite familiar with the institution and had developed a range of strategies to find whatever information or resources necessary to do their jobs.

And finally, the learning experiences described by support staff when dealing with authoritarian supervisors can best be described as highly restrictive. Coping with daily surveillance and control; receiving regular feedback that their ideas were better kept to themselves; that their job was to do the work and nothing more, planted seeds for diminishing self worth and lack of competence. Women visibly struggled when describing this kind of dynamic with their bosses. Issues of abuse of power, control, treating people like objects, lack of fairness, social elitism, insensitivity, 'blindness', all rose to the surface. While describing their situations, they were also trying to make some sense of the experience, trying to salvage some degree of composure for themselves. In this matrix, what were they learning? Often, they were just trying to cope with their feelings of frustration. Those more fortunate fell back on their personal values and morals, simply seeing this as an example of behaviour to avoid. Lea made the observation that although she was ambitious and wanted to get ahead, if it required developing the condescending behaviours of an authoritarian style, she needed to rethink her aspirations.

> I've even thought to myself - this is the first time I voice this - if being a supervisor means I have to be mean, be bad to people - I don't want to. From what I've seen - the higher up you are - people who have more power, tend to look down on the others. Not everybody, there are exceptions. And I thought about that - if I ever have to treat people like that, I don't want to be there - I'll stay like this forever. Even though I have the desire of getting to higher positions - I'm very ambitious. But if that's what it takes - I don't think I'll get there.

The stories of Katherine, Janice and Erika provide a basis for exploring this dynamic between support staff and their supervisors. Their experiences illustrate an important feature: the sequence of exposure to different supervisory styles has

little bearing on their impact. Regardless of which style of supervision they were accustomed to, and regardless of their chronological age at the time of exposure, each style - participative, laissez-faire or authoritarian, had a distinct impact on the quality of their learning and feelings of competence at work.

Katherine's experience at the University is indicative of many support staff in that she will soon be celebrating a quarter century of service with the institution. In all that time she has worked within the same department, which is not to say Katherine hasn't experienced her share of change. She has reported to different bosses over the years, has been through organizational restructuring, has moved to new facilities, and has adapted to changes in office automation. In her relationship with a previous boss, Katherine had been fairly autonomous. She knew about many aspects of running the department and was the principal liaison with important outside contacts. All that changed a few years ago, when along with major reorganization, came a new supervisor.

> When I started working here, we had a smaller budget and a smaller department. My opinion was asked about things - and because they knew I worked directly with the clientele - with the students and so on - they'd say "what do you think we should do about this situation? How is that going to impact? How is that going to change things? How is it going to affect you if we change it this way." So my opinion counted, from the perspective of my position. I felt that I was part of a team that worked together... but not any more. My opinion is not important [now]. There are a lot of things that make me feel that way. As the administrators have changed, there's different attitudes towards the secretaries - towards people who don't have a degree. That's what it is basically.
>
> My former boss used to kid me - "let me ask the boss." He knew that I knew the answer better than he did. Whereas, the person that I'm working for now, doesn't like to think that. I had that reputation years ago - that I ran this department. When my current boss took over as head of the department I think it bothered him. I think he took steps to make sure that I wasn't running things. He didn't want to hear that a secretary ran the department.
>
> I resent it when ...I have to go to these meetings and take minutes - and ideas are flashed back and forth. Nobody asks "what do you think?"

> because I could contribute - but they don't care. At the beginning of this change over - I would put in my opinions, because I was used to doing that - and then they stopped asking me to come to meetings. I didn't give ridiculous opinions or ideas, I'm not a forceful person... I just would very quietly put in my opinion and I'd just get a look like... 'why are you speaking?'

It was obvious during our encounter that Katherine felt somewhat humiliated as well as resentful about this state of affairs. Especially so because from her perspective, all her efforts to deal with the situation led to the same 'dead end'. No matter what she did, she consistently got the message that she was only expected to function within constricted boundaries. Any departures from these boundaries were met with either derision or suspicion. After years of making vital contributions within a team environment, Katherine was now learning to 'mind her place'. And now, with her 'voice' diminished, what was she experiencing? What was she learning about her role in this restructured environment?

> I think their attitude was "oh well she doesn't want to do that because it's more work for her." It is partly that - but, I don't mind more work - if I have time to do it. I'm supposed to be doing a job and four telephone lines are ringing and the work is constantly being interrupted. The work is more complicated then - there's more opportunity for error. For them, it's okay because they just sit there and give orders - they come up with these ideas and then walk away. To me the issue is to have things go as smoothly and as efficiently as possible. I've got four lines ringing where I have to be answering questions - and, sometimes these calls take 20 minutes with one person, explaining every aspect of the program - and another line is ringing. And all these people want the same amount of attention - plus you've got this paperwork piled up - there's only so many hours in the day.

Noticing the negative impact this situation was having on her attitude and motivation, Katherine described her struggles to maintain some sense of self esteem. Fortunately, she had inner reserves to draw upon and took pride in her ability to diffuse difficult interpersonal communications with students and their parents. Her strong interest and concern to be of help to students prevented her from withdrawing totally into feelings of self-doubt and incompetence and enabled her to continue making what she considered to be a valuable contribution.

In Janice's case, her experience was the reverse of Katherine's. She had come from a highly structured, authoritarian environment to one where she was constantly exposed to absorbing new information, while learning to adapt to the more participative management style of her current supervisor. She described some of the dynamics which contributed to her development:

> ...when I felt the trust factor - when I was respected - I wasn't just the secretary - when my opinion was asked for and taken into full consideration. At that point, it came to me... I knew what I was talking about. I was now part of the final product. I would learn the "inside information" behind the aspects I had to deal with. It gave me more confidence in my knowledge. If I had to express my opinion on something, I knew more than just what was on paper. I knew the background. I hadn't done that before.
>
> I finally felt I'm part of the team - as opposed to just being an employee. I prefer doing things as a team. Out of all the departments where I had worked, there was no team work. Yes, we all worked together on projects - but we were still working separately - doing our own little parts. Now, I don't find anything is ever assumed in this office. There are no orders given - it's not a hierarchy. I've never had the feeling that I can't turn around and say: "No. I don't think we should do it that way". When I first started at the University, it was very much impressed upon me to - "do it - just do it". I remember doing things and knowing - this is wrong - how can we be doing this? what a waste! I'm sure if I had been older, it wouldn't have been acceptable to me. I think with age comes knowledge - stepping back to re-evaluate for a minute. I see the progression from when I first started at the university.

With a supervisor who included her in the day-to-day "inside information", Janice felt that her perspective mattered. Dialogue and teamwork formed the basis of decision making in this inclusive atmosphere of mutual trust and respect and Janice found her sense of competence and confidence flourishing as a consequence. Comparing her current situation to her early days of work, Janice attributes her youth to putting up with circumstances which she would now consider unacceptable.

I wondered about her final comment, is it just a question of age that determines the

dynamics between workers? Katherine's circumstances described earlier and Erika's story which follows are certainly witness to occasions where "older", more experienced support staff were faced with the same lack of sensitivity Janice described in her former "just do it" environment. How do subordinates and supervisors become colleagues? I reflected on my readings of Jarvis (1987) and the point he made about the differences between andragogy and pedagogy; in his construction of a social theory of learning he compared the context of the relationship between teacher and learner as being an issue of social status and therefore relative power, rather than an issue of difference in age. I would have to conclude that the dynamic between supervisor and subordinate is more than a matter of age - it is also a matter of how each chooses to relate to the other. For better or worse, a supervisor has considerable power to set the tone of interpersonal exchange at work - whether that manifests as inclusive, open and trusting dialogue between associates, or the deliberate, perfunctory giving of orders to someone who is 'immature or doesn't know any better'. A subordinate can have some influence - but in the final analysis, by virtue of their social status, it is the supervisor who controls or gives way in this social dynamic.

Erika's story illustrates that regardless of maturity or level of experience on the part of support staff, certain dynamics between a supervisor and subordinate can eventually interfere with working or learning effectively. Describing a period during which she had been reporting to a boss with a distinctly authoritarian style; Erika referred to him as a "blocker".

> ..there were so many different people in the office and different bosses - I've been here for 15 years - and every four years you change Chairmen. I was blocked a few times because one Chairman thought that I shouldn't take computer seminars. He really thought I shouldn't know too much. He encouraged me to learn things I already knew. The wordprocessing program - I knew quite well - and yet he insisted I take a course in it. He only lasted three years - instead of only blocking me he blocked everybody - he was a blocker.

> The chairman that I had for the longest time gave me a lot of freedom. I could plan my work the way I see fit. I'm aware of my deadlines - that kind of stuff... But I did have one chairman who decided that the reason the department was going badly was because of the secretaries. He gave me a terrible time. He watched me like a hawk. I became so nervous - it was harder to do my work. I didn't want to complain because I knew there was discussions about closing down the department. All they needed was another complaint. I was trying to be patient and I knew he was under pressure. The first year wasn't so bad, but then he really lost control. He couldn't do his own work, so he decided he was going to do mine. Unfortunately the only person I could turn to at the time had no authority to do anything. The only other thing I could do was go to the Dean, who was mad with us anyway. If I complained, it will be a real disaster, so I didn't do anything for the two years. Finally, everybody realized what this man was doing and they got rid of him. But he really made my life very difficult. That's when my learning process - got stopped completely.

I found it curious that Erika referred to this period as a stage when her learning process "got stopped completely". Based on her description of the circumstances, I believed she had learned to be circumspect and how to endure a complex social predicament. Her situation illustrated well the issues that Jarvis (1987) and Lennerlof (1989) raise regarding the ongoing socialization process and its impact on learning at work. Taking into consideration the surrounding circumstances in the environment at the time, and Erika's perceptions of the choices available to her, she chose to endure rather than influence the situation. Could this be considered an example of the kind of working conditions that led to the 'learned helplessness' that Lennerlof spoke about? With the benefit of the experience behind her, I explored Erika's perceptions further discovering that she had expectations of herself which hadn't been met in her handling of this situation. If a similar situation ever arose she was now determined to deal with it differently.

> I learned that I should be a more assertive. I only asserted myself when things got really absurd, and I should have put my foot down from the very beginning - and said - 'you do your job and I'll do mine. You have no right to tell me how to do my job - you just have a right to look at the results'. I made the mistake of allowing him to make me nervous and put me under stress. I can't find documents because I get so nervous - they're right in front of me and I can't see them. And, I should have been more honest - instead of not saying anything.

One can only speculate as to the impact this alternate approach might have had. Taking the road of assertive dissent rather than silent endurance towards an authoritarian supervisor is fraught with risks and possibilities. With one exception, I noticed that participants faced with an overbearing boss were more likely to choose the path of silent endurance. Only Janice had spoken of openly challenging her supervisor's authority in circumstances she deemed to be unfair. Along with all the past events she had quietly endured, this 'eruption' convinced her that it was time to find another job at the University. Indeed, shortly after this incident Janice had applied for and secured another position.

Dealing with a boss whose style was participative invoked radically different reactions from support staff. In contrast to Erika and Katherine, Marie's description of her relationship with her supervisor glowed with enthusiasm.

> My bosses are very open to suggestions - any input I have. I'm given a lot of room for input, for feedback. This whole project we're working on now - I know people are listening and receptive to my comments. And it is not just "well yeah, tell me your comments but I've already formed my opinion of what I'm going to do." The atmosphere is "give me your comments, let's look at things, let's talk about it." So, I feel that I'm given the opportunity to really influence and change my work.
>
> I've been very fortunate - I have learned good things from my boss. I see how she behaves, and I try - not that I want to be like her - but she has worthwhile qualities - she's very fair, she's very open. Those things are really valuable when you have to deal with people. It's easier if you can meet one-on-one and face things, as opposed to being afraid to show your face or, send messages on the computer as opposed to talking with them. I've picked up on certain things - how to behave professionally. It's nice to be nice, but sometimes you might have to do things that are difficult, or that people may be upset at you for. This is all part of it, and - I've learned how to deal with that.
>
> When you have confrontations - you don't run away from them or, pretend they don't exist. Facing it - What's the problem? What can we do to fix it? Or how can we get around it? It's not just "well I'll just shut my office door and it will go away eventually"... but dealing with it. Trying to resolve a problem so that people come out of it - happy - or not even always happy, sometimes it just doesn't work. But they come out knowing that the problem was looked at, it was dealt with, the case was heard.

I speculated about the contrasts between Katherine, Erika, Janice and Marie's stories, and how they reinforced my understanding of behaviour arising from a context. If I were to look at their stories as strictly expressive of their unique individual attributes, I would be missing an essential part of the picture. Each had their unique psychological, emotional and intellectual gifts and limitations to be sure, yet it was clear that in those circumstances where mutual respect and open dialogue prevailed between subordinate and supervisor, participants reported a greater sense of competence, involvement and commitment to their work. Recalling Bandura's (1986) description of social learning through observation, Marie's story illustrates how modelling professional behaviour can have a powerful impact on a subordinate.

Dealing with bosses whose style was more 'laissez-faire', both Evelyn and Joan recounted similar learning experiences. Within this 'hands-off' dynamic, patterns of learning emerged that reflect back to the first section of this chapter. Left largely to their own devices, both women figured out, on their own, how to do what needed to be done, while building up their own competence and confidence. Evelyn describes the impact on her development of her relationship with her boss:

> I guess my boss's personality was such that he was more hands off. Maybe he assumed I should be able to fend for myself. In a way I look at that and say sometimes - that wasn't too fair. But - I commend him for having done that because he allowed me to grow, and he allowed that maturity. Because had he not - had he held my hand - I would have never matured.
>
> I'm sure had I really problem solved the wrong way, my boss would have said - "wait a second - you don't do things like that". So, I was lucky - maybe the resources I had chosen were correct - maybe my previous secretarial education helped me. But, I know that job really helped me grow. I don't think I'd be the person I am today, had I not had that job.
>
> My maturity, self confidence, and ability to speak developed. Before, when I had to speak in front of a crowd, I thought, "I'm not going to make it" Now, it doesn't bother me. It gave me self confidence - assertiveness. I guess I was one of the lucky ones, because my feeling is that I successfully accomplished what I set out to do - that I shouldn't be afraid to try things that are maybe a little bit beyond my grasp.

Joan revealed the dynamic with her supervisor when I asked her whether she felt she had any influence over her working conditions

> Certain things yes - my time was my own. The Chairman gave me a lot of responsibility, whether I wanted it or not. I learned how to take on responsibilities that somebody in my position normally wouldn't have. I learned how to deal with different people. If he wasn't around - I could go and argue a case with the Dean or something like that. Not that it was something I should have been learning - because it wasn't really part of my job. But if I hadn't done it, nobody else would. People knew I had the Chairman's full support - so that gave me the power to be able to do that.
>
> I learned how to go and talk to these people and make them see our point of view - it is amazing when I think of it - some of the things I did the last few years along those lines. Going into those meetings - I felt they listened and paid attention to what I said - and it's good to feel like maybe you are getting somewhere.

Evelyn provided a definitive and comprehensive viewpoint on the impact of the dynamics between supervisor and subordinate in this environment. To my query about what motivated her personally, Evelyn's response included an interesting twist. She was obviously not just talking about her own experience, but about her observations of others in her surroundings as well.

> ..what motivates people and what de-motivates people is the people they report to. You can get really turned off of your work and learning and trying to improve yourself when you report to somebody who you don't have respect for. When that is changed - you learn so much more. You basically flourish. You really do. Everything is so much easier to do, it's a pleasure to do. Supervisors don't realize the power that they have. If you earn the respect of the people you work with - that is a lot of power. People don't realize that it is based on respect and not intimidation. Intimidation gets you nowhere. People who supervise don't know the power they have over their employees. It's a power that some take and abuse. And there are other people who don't know they have it. And there are the odd ones who use it in a positive way. To use it in a positive way, they have to stay squeaky clean. They have to be fair, just, admit their mistakes. I want to say 'live honourably' - sounds funny, but it's true.
>
> If you see that your boss is doing her or his best and is being fair with the workers, fair with the funds - you will act in the same way. When you're in a management position you have to set the example. You set the stage

> for the environment that people are trying to work and learn in - and people will start treating other people in that environment in the same way. Because whatever behaviour is tolerated sends out the message - I can do the same thing. I think if the professionalism starts at the top, it will work its way down. I've seen it filter down. 'If it's good for him - it's good for me'. People are affected by it.
>
> When you have good morale - the work's going to be done better. It's going to be done faster. As soon as the morale in an office slips - that office is in for a lot of trouble - and often it's very hard to repair it once the damage has been done.

Evelyn's astute observations come into play again when she talks about her role as support staff vis a vis the supervisor's role. She articulated well an issue that some of the other participants could only allude to. Commenting on the fact that she had initiated certain procedures, there was little expectation on her part to get credit for taking this initiative given her 'status'. Instead, she considered herself fortunate to be dealing with someone who had the courage to give credit where it was due when the time came.

> ..when certain things were done in a certain way, and if the procedure doesn't look right - I know they won't listen to me. I would say to my supervisor couldn't we do it this way? Then she would have to decide either she would take my idea and, being in a higher position - bring it forth - she basically took my suggestions and - they listened to her because she was the higher level. When it was time to find somebody to replace her she recommended me - she had the courage to say these were my suggestions not hers.
>
> The way it works - you have to be at a certain level before people will actually listen to you. I don't think that will ever change - it's a shame, but it happens.

An undercurrent in the dynamic between supervisor and subordinate was revealed: a connection existed between the level of skills acknowledged and the type of working relationship in which they were engaged. Reviewing the data, it became evident that it was often the authoritative supervisory style which would manifest as appropriating the skills of support staff. As Jackson (1991) points out, and as Evelyn conceded, for the most part, bureaucratic, hierarchical systems are set up

to restrict rather than enhance the scope of responsibility taken on by clerical workers.

> "...personnel documents represent the work as 'routine' and 'procedural' thus limiting the scope of knowledge that could be required - then tightly restrict the scope within which the clerical is authorized to act, thus limiting the responsibility that she can be said to hold. Any functions which she performs beyond these limits appear as tasks delegated and supervised by superior, in this way the products of her work become the action of the superior for organizational purposes. (Jackson, 1991, p. 22)

I was reminded of the point that Hirschhorn et al (1989) made: in our post industrial 'information age', learning in the workplace has less to do with acquiring skills to do the job, and more to do with learning different interpersonal roles. This observation however, is strongly linked to an organization's culture and structure. Within a hierarchical environment, where chain of command and knowing one's place are emphasized, few opportunities exist to experiment with different interpersonal roles between subordinates and supervisors.

Working With The Smart Machine

> When I first started working I was basically a typist. There was a lot of typing. Then, we were suddenly presented with a computer. Nobody knew who was going to use it. So, I fooled around with it and I asked people how you do this and that. Then I got it, because I was the only one who learned how to use it. That really changed my job. Instead of typing pages, over and over again to suit a professor's corrections - I could move things around - I found this wonderful. I took on a lot more administrative work because the computer facilitated my work so much. (Erika)

Erika's situation is similar to many of the women in this study. Most of them were proud owners of the IBM Selectric before computers invaded this workplace. The first computers introduced into departments were cumbersome objects connected to the University's main frame. The size of a huge wing back chair - they were chunky pieces of furniture that seemed awkward in an office space. Having

sufficient space seemed to be the decisive factor in where they were placed. Some departments were hopeful that placing them in high traffic areas would somehow encourage their use. I recalled having one such beast in our department. We had been informed that in house courses were available to learn about them - but most of the people in my department just tinkered with it. We would sign up for one hour at a time to 'play around'. We had to go up to the fourth floor to a room where a behemoth of a printer sputtered out our printed pages at the rate of one in three minutes. The printer needed its own room because the constant noise was deafening. Then gradually, personal computers started popping up like mushrooms on desks. At first only a chosen few had them. Before long PC's were everywhere. And, the university has been upgrading ever since. Now a common joke circulating is: without an email address, you don't really exist.

In her engrossing book on the impact of advanced information technology on workers and organizations, Zuboff (1988) explored the reactions of workers in the early stages of their shift to this new reality. She considered this a 'window of opportunity' to examine the changes in the way work is done, in our own time, equating it to similar events at the onset of the industrial revolution. Through her investigations Zuboff delineates the potential of information technology to change the political landscape of the workplace. Her approach sensitized me to the phenomenal impact of computers on the work of support staff. I became fascinated with the idea of exploring how this technological innovation had shaped the learning experiences of these women. Going from typewriters to a computers - what stories would they have to tell about learning?

Perhaps because the participants had many years of office experience, these women often spoke nostalgically about their old typewriters, tucked away safely for typing the occasional form or envelope. Although they acknowledged that computers offered them a range of possibilities never dreamed of, they usually spoke with

pride about the sense of control they had over their old typewriters. If something needed changing or adjusting, they could easily poke around and do it themselves.

Joan admitted that of all her learning experiences, computers were "the scariest", her description of the process she went through illustrates experiential learning well:

> I really had to be pushed up to the wall. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to handle it or something. When we first got the computers - I said: 'can't I just stay with my nice typewriter - look what a wonderful typist I am - I never make mistakes - do I have to learn to use this thing?" It was hysterical. I've never completely gotten over that, even as we go from one machine to another. But I think it's a typical learning experience where you need to know something about your equipment before going to a course. My first computer course didn't make any sense to me at all. Because I knew absolutely nothing about it, I didn't know what questions to ask. Six or eight months after I'd been using the computer I took another course - what a difference! I learned so much the second time - because I was using my own stuff - it was geared to the work that I did. The first time, it was all kind of wasted. Certain manuals help - you get a lot of information that way. You teach yourself a lot of stuff.

Although Joan prefaced her learning experiences with computers as being 'the scariest', her description of the difference between a useful learning experience to one that she felt was a waste of time - point to some basic assumptions of andragogy. Learning related to personal experience was more meaningful for her. Almost as an afterthought, her self-directedness comes to light when she refers to her use of manuals to "teach herself a lot of stuff".

The behavioural or instrumental model has its place. The notions of "filling the gap" and "setting objectives" works well for technical training. However, as Joan demonstrates, building on experiential knowledge, "knowing which questions to ask", and understanding the context in which the new skills will be used, are crucial to getting the most out of the process. Now more sensitized to circumstances which help her learn more effectively, Joan also used the manual more often to "teach herself" what she needed to know as the need arose.

Katherine's experience echoed Joan's in some ways. She too had been sent to a computer course before they were even introduced into the office. Consequently she forgot most of what was taught. In Katherine's case however, she perceived a curious limitation in her skills because, as she put it: "I just know the software - nothing about the operating system of computers." Trained and accustomed to an office environment with typewriters and gestetners, Katherine did not hesitate to get her hands dirty occasionally to 'trouble-shoot' when something went wrong with equipment. In this computer environment, she didn't even understand the language anymore - let alone try to handle problems that came up.

> Learning computer skills has been the major change for me. Mostly it's learning from somebody who knows - who recommends software, and encourages you to try it. I feel that my computer skills are really below par. I just know how to work with certain software - nothing about the operating system of computers.
>
> I don't feel like I even have marketable skills any more - because everything is so computer-oriented. I couldn't do any trouble-shooting. If something is wrong with the machine - I have to call somebody for help. When the thing stops working or - it says 'out of memory', I wonder - what am I supposed to do now? Can I deal with this? Then people ask: "how many meg" and, "what size is your hard disk?" I don't know that stuff. People come and push me out of the way. Then they get into DOS and start figuring stuff out. That just goes right over my head. I just know the software.

I took the opportunity to discuss Katherine's perception that this was a limitation on her part. From my experience working with recent graduates from Office Systems Technology programs, I knew of the clear distinction made between the skills required to use software programs, and the skills required to maintain and upgrade equipment and software. Faced with the same predicament as Katherine described, a recent OST grad would be more likely to say "Get a technician in here, this is the technician's job". For her part, Katherine saw this distinction as a flaw in her skill level - because of habits she developed in her typewriter days. "When I understand the makings of something, then I feel that I can work better with it."

Building on the theme of 'creating order', discussed earlier, participants illustrated the ways in which they had adapted computer technology to help them organize and streamline regular tasks. Erika describes how she changed the way she worked once the computer became a regular tool for her personal use.

> ..keeping lists of students up to date - all I had to do was take off the names of those who had graduated and stick on the new ones - this was a tremendous help. In the past I had to retype everything - in alphabetical order. I kept computer records, reports - everything became easier. I was able to take on stuff the Chairman used to do because I was no longer busy typing the same report over and over again. I don't feel I've stagnated because there's always room to make things better.
>
> I computerized the office - all the files are on the computer. All the reports, most of the records that are more or less of a permanent nature are on the computer - everything that could be computerized, I just organized it differently and I hope more efficiently. And I have taken more work out of the chairman's stack because he has all kinds of other things to deal with. And, being a very good boss, he lets me help him.

Erika's story epitomizes the ideal scenario expected from automating an environment. She can do more work, more efficiently, in less time - and is therefore free to take on more of her supervisor's responsibilities. Having relegated the more routine tasks to the computer, and taking the initiative to do more of her bosses work, Erika does not even realize how easily and smoothly the course of history was just altered in her midst.

Among the many engrossing subjects of her book, Zuboff (1988) discusses the evolution of the white collar worker. The introduction of typewriters and other office machinery, in the late 1800's, had an "impact on the routinization, fragmentation, and feminization of clerical work." (p.116) Zuboff describes the way that routine, repetitive tasks were "carved out" from a broader range of managerial activities, to be performed by the new low status clerical workers. She questions how the application of information technology will further transform white collar activities. "Will it enlarge the sphere of 'industrialized' clerical positions, or

will it be a force to reintegrate clerical work with its managerial past? If so, what implication might this have for our current conceptions of the middle-management function?" (p.123) These questions will be returned to at the close of this section.

Suzanne talked about her transition from the typewriter to the computer, the impact it had on the way she worked, and the way she had integrated its communicative abilities to help her organize her work.

> I was the dinosaur when it came to computers. I loved my IBM typewriter. I felt this was a skill that I had and it got me where I am today. With the typewriter - just by the rhythm - I'm reading and thinking as I'm typing. With the computer, the thought processes are different and I don't feel it - through my fingers. I'm not sure what I'm saying anymore, so I have to read my hard copy all the time.
>
> The Macintosh was sitting in our office for about six months, it wasn't even plugged in. We didn't have time to take the plastic off to 'mouse around'. We had to have a quiet period. Everyone figured I would be the last person to change over. Finally, we're doing a little 'mousing around' - I couldn't believe myself. Within literally one afternoon to the next morning - it was a changeover - and, I love it. I'm not that computer literate. I'm learning. To me, it's a glorified typewriter that I can play with - cut, paste and bold - get nice neat letters.
>
> E-mail has opened up a new world to me. It makes my job a lot easier, more efficient. After creating a mailing list - the message goes out to everyone right away. No printing, no envelopes. It takes so long to get anything across campus with regular mail - whereas this is instantaneous. At the beginning of each term there's a lot of work - getting forms in. Checking with people - do you really mean that? With e-mail, I can keep copies of everything, so I have a record of my questions. I don't have to write it down or try to remember it. It's all there. And, I know they've received it.

I asked Suzanne if she worked differently as a result of using the computer.

> Work is done much faster. Though - there's also much more of it. Although the saying goes 'computers will save you time' - they also create work. We're creating more paperwork - more documents - more responses. Before you could verbally say to a student - 'no, you can't do that' and make a note in the file. Now because you've got a computer, everyone wants it in writing. You're covering yourself as well - there it is in black and white. But, it does create more work. There's so much

> information that we're receiving and creating and circulating - sometimes it's too much.
>
> I play with the computer. I use it to create documents and change the way they're set up - and to update information that's going out - making it more accessible to people. I use it instead of the telephone and, I'm using it to cut down on paper.

It was quite clear from the interviews that support staff working in an area where information technology was more advanced had much greater exposure to a broader range of the computer's capabilities. Their learning experiences showed substantial evidence of being situationally specific. Although tremendous resources continue to be earmarked towards the maintenance and development of a highly computer literate environment, this trend is uneven in the way it is applied throughout the University, thus providing different opportunities for learning in different areas.

Marie worked in an area where thousands of forms were processed in a year. Although she knew that this information would soon be processed electronically, Marie could not yet imagine what impact this would have on her work.

> It's just so much faster, it's easier. You're able to get data, statistics, as opposed to going through paper files. We process between 18 and 20 thousand forms a year. Before computers, we had to log everything manually. If anyone needed to keep track of it, we had to look through pages and pages of paper, trying to find this entry. With computers - you don't have to waste time searching for things - they're at your fingertips. We're able to give better and faster service. In a few years, we won't have to file all these forms. No more paper forms. They will come electronically. It's hard to comment on it now, because I don't know what it's going to be like yet.

Lea worked in an area where technical upgrading was a matter of daily occurrence, she was flooded with opportunities to learn about computer technology. Fortunately, she also thrived on the constant stimulation.

> I have to learn all sorts of new software in this job. Everything I know now, I didn't know two years ago. Software develops so quickly and changes - there might be an upgrade, sometimes two months - sometimes

> in the same day. We are continuously changing and learning. It's amazing. With the new data access - if you have a computer and modem at home, there's now a new system connecting you to the University. When we were having the trial period - in the morning - you would tell a customer one thing - and in the afternoon we would be telling somebody else something completely different. Now that we finally know Windows - they come out with Windows '95! Once you get to know, let's say Wordperfect 6, then they come up with 6.1. We just got Groupwise - the mailing systems. I finally learned how to do the agenda, appointments, book the conference room and everything. All that through Groupwise. Now there's a new upgraded version - even the menu changes.

Relying almost exclusively on her own resources, Lea's attitude to learning in this environment was: "it's very simple - all these packages come with on line help. So every time you have a question and you search for help on such and such a topic - you just read and do it." She was currently learning a software program preferred by scientists and publishers because data could be entered in Word or Wordperfect, while the output was scientific language.

> I'm doing a job for a professor. I got the software, and it's not easy, but I'm learning it by myself. I try to work by myself. But when it is complicated, I ask for help. I ask someone who's an expert on the software. I only reach that stage when I've tried, and can't get it.

The issue of 'listening to communicate' also took an interesting turn in Lea's environment. In this highly literate computer environment, she observed the new habits unfolding as people communicated with and related to each other.

> Most of our communication is through e-mail. I schedule my boss's appointments or send him reminders. When he wants me to do a letter or something, he sends it by e-mail. All the information that we get - if there's an update, or something has changed - even though it is only for the receptionist to tell clients - it's sent by e-mail - so everybody knows that there has been a change.

> People are always looking at the computer and typing - they have less time to communicate. You see everybody staring at the monitor. You talk to someone through a computer, electronically instead of talking to that person. Sometimes it's better to hear a voice - talk to someone - keep in touch with people. But if every time there was a change, they were to call all the employees together for a meeting - it would take too long. We had the Principal's plans for the University's future distributed to us through email. Everybody is informed.

Lea understands that communicating information and changes has become easier electronically. Yet she misses the nuances of contact that come with face to face communications. Listening to communicate has metamorphosed into reading and writing to communicate in the electronic environment.

In an attempt to avoid "the stale reproduction of the past", Zuboff (1988) alerts us to imagine that progress in information technology is an "historic opportunity to more fully develop the economic and human potential of our work organizations". (p.7)

> "There is a world to be lost and a world to be gained. Choices that appear to be merely technical will redefine our lives together at work. ..a powerful new technology, such as that represented by the computer, fundamentally reorganizes the infrastructure of our material world. It eliminates former alternatives. It creates new possibilities. It necessitates fresh choices. ..The choices that we face concern the conception and distribution of knowledge in the workplace. ..The choices that we make will shape relations of authority in the workplace. ..The choices that we make will determine the techniques of administration that color the psychological ambience and shape communicative behaviour in the emerging workplace. (pp.5-7)

The learning experiences described by participants in relation to working with computers proved to be context dependent. Although it may not have been easy initially, participants gradually modify their use of computers to the needs of their work environment. Access to a broader range of technological innovation seems to encourage a broader range of skill development. As they become more familiar with computer language and the context, they also become more adept at seeking out and incorporating whatever information they need to feel competent about their new tasks. Those with the autonomy and time to experiment show signs of creatively adapting the technology to meet their own purposes. Somewhat aware of the impact technology was having on how they worked, participants were more concerned with mastering and adapting to changes than they were about the implications of dealing with "too much information" or the fact that interpersonal communication was increasingly done electronically.

Returning to Zuboff's questions cited earlier in this section, in the context of this environment some polarization in skill development emerges. The sphere of activity for some support staff is still in the realm of processing more paper work, faster. Several others are actively 'changing the landscape' without fully realizing the implications this might have on their status as workers.

Personal Development

When I decided to include the question - "How have your learning experiences at work contributed to your development as a person?" into the interview, I may have had preconceived ideas about possible responses. I thought there might be signs of a trajectory - making choices, taking decisions, 'I hoped to achieve such and such, and this is what came to pass'. Certainly, the elements of choices, decisions, hopes for achievement leading to personal development were present, but a precise goal was rarely envisioned beforehand. Their stories about personal development demonstrated a greater awareness of principles of conduct for the present which unfolded as valued achievements, rather than evidence of working towards a particular goal. Patterns emerged regarding some guiding principles these women held in common. On the road towards greater personal development, they spoke about 'being professional' and how they dealt with the challenges of merging or setting boundaries between their personal and work lives.

Before exploring these concepts in further detail however, I would like to review some aspects of personal development that have already been touched upon in previous sections and which merit reiteration in this context. Turning back to their descriptions of the way these women coped with the transition of facing new responsibilities unassisted, we discover evidence of their growing sense of achievement and self confidence. Although they frequently endured anxiety and

disorientation before reaching this point, they looked back on the period as pivotal to their growth and development. An obvious connection emerged here between the data and the notions of 'spiral' learning and 'significant' learning referred to by Bateson (1994) and Rogers (1994). For these women, moving away from a stage where they were accustomed to following instructions and functioning within narrow parameters was initially frightening and disorienting. I sensed their bewilderment at leaving behind an old identity when their new identity had not yet fully formed. After years of functioning within restricted boundaries, Suzanne questioned her ability to think at all. She admitted having a 'nervous breakdown' after approximately three months into the new job, which required a respite from work altogether. Once recovered and back on the job, she understood how her own fear had intensified her feelings of being unable to cope and resolved to have greater faith in, and act on, her growing abilities. In retrospect, Suzanne was able to say "work has made me who I am today - I know myself much better through work".

Janice went through a similar transition to Suzanne, growing beyond an environment where she was 'doing what she was told to do' to one where she was more involved and included. Being in an environment where she felt that her contributions were valued increased her self confidence and competence. No matter what trials these women went through to achieve a more autonomous or interdependent stage, they had no doubt that facing their challenges and taking risks had contributed to their personal development. Although there may have been an occasional nostalgic trace, like Lea's, of "happier, worry free" days, most of these women equated 'development' as confronting the challenges of the unknown.

Another area worth recapitulating is the value these women placed on learning from others. Their keen observation of interpersonal dynamics functioned as a vast resource for adopting or rejecting models of interpersonal behaviour. Interestingly, the behaviours adopted had as much to do with how one lived one's life in general,

interacting with others, as it had to do with deciding how to conduct oneself at work. In this vein, strong impressions gained through observing the behaviours of others often influenced participants' behaviours and attitudes for years.

Francine expressed her admiration of a co-worker, and how it had influenced her to behave with dignity and composure regardless of the circumstances.

> ..one individual had a great impact on me... not only in work, but in life too! I found her to have such dignity as a woman, maintaining her composure at all times. If I was in a bind about something, I'd say, 'what would she do?'...that helped me in making decisions. She always came out of situations, even rough ones, with her head up - totally composed. ...just observing her all the time, I thought 'that is what you call a true professional'.

Returning to the issues identified at the start of this section, we begin to understand the scope of experiences these women valued as being developmental, and how their concepts of 'being professional' unfold in their private and work lives.

It was evident from their body language and tone of voice that 'being professional' represented some measure of control over their work lives. Joan's words speak for many of the participants who voiced a regard for 'professionalism'.

> You do your job and you do it as well as you possibly can. You treat your job like it's an important thing that you're doing. And you act in whatever way it takes to make it appear like that. If you don't give your job the respect it deserves - you're taking a lot away from yourself. When you're dealing with a clientele they have the right to expect the best that you're capable of doing in the best possible way. It makes your job more interesting for you, too.

Participants often brought up learning experiences which related to coming to terms with the boundaries between their work and personal lives as contributing to their development. I refer to 'merging boundaries' to describe those situations where participants choose not to distinguish between learning at work and learning in life. 'Setting boundaries', on the other hand refers to those situations where participants have learned to draw a line between work and personal life so that one does not

encroach upon the other.

From the beginning, when these women were asked to define what learning at work meant to them personally, their definitions often had an inclusive aspect to it. Through their definitions it was evident they grasped the idea that there were many different kinds of learning, appropriate to different situations and different contexts, yet applicable across domains as well. This was particularly evident when it came to dealing with people.

> I think that a lot of the things I learned at home raising my kids helped with my job. It goes both ways. I don't know if I would have been able to work with people as easily as I do if I hadn't had a family. Because through them I got to know a lot of different people - young people. So, there's always new ideas - you don't get stuck. I can't imagine that people can actually make two completely separate selves without anything leaking through - seems to me they'd be more like robots. I think you have to try to control it though - remain professional at work - and not alienate everybody at home. At home - you probably fly off the handle more than you would at work, because you do that with people that you're close to. But, you learn not to. That's what I mean by being professional - you don't take your personal life to the office so that it affects your work in a bad way - and you don't dump on your family at home.

Joan's description provides evidence that there's both a positive and negative side to the potential of applying learning from one context to another. We operate within the confines of different roles at work compared to our home lives. Setting boundaries becomes as important as merging boundaries as we transfer knowledge from one context to another. Setting boundaries was also evident as a means to cope with the perceived unreasonable demands of others.

Several participants spoke of coming to terms with the infringement of work 'duties' upon their personal space as much as on their personal lives. On the job this would take the form of drawing a line when certain behaviours of others were considered to be an unwelcome imposition. Marie perceived this encroachment as 'being

taken advantage of' and had learned to back away from it.

> I'll do anything that's in my power to help people here at work or whatever, but - don't take advantage of me, don't jerk me around. I don't like that. When I get that attitude or those reactions from people - then I back off. I won't be as helpful, where normally I don't mind getting involved in helping people. But if they treat me like that - I'll just stay on my side and worry about my stuff and you handle your part of it. I guess I've learned when to back off.

Feeling that her longevity had become a resource that was only considered worth plundering, Christine spoke with determination about her need to draw a firm line in order not to feel abused on the job.

> When I originally started, there was a lot of teamwork involving a lot of people - and now it's kind of dumped - basically on the secretary. It disappoints me. It changes your attitude. I never thought I'd hear myself say "It's not in my job description - I'm not doing it." And I find myself saying it. Unfortunately. I don't like it, but that's my only recourse. What ends up happening is that older staff like myself - because we have a little smattering of everything - people say - "go ask her, she knows". And you think, wait a minute - yes, I've been here a long time, but - don't abuse me. It's someone else's job, not mine. At one time it was very nice to hear people say "you did a great job - blah blah blah." Now, I don't want to hear that. Don't dump on me and tell me that after.

Of all the participants, Evelyn had the widest range of opportunities to experiment with balancing her personal and work lives. After gradually working her way up from a junior clerical position to one with considerable responsibilities within the same department, Evelyn realized she needed to make more flexible work arrangements in order to spend more time with her young son.

> I had gotten to a level that I was quite satisfied with in my career. But with a young son - the hours were just too much, I felt I wasn't spending enough time with him. So I approached my boss about it and we tried several things. We tried job sharing - that didn't work out - there were too many small details to look after. I'd have to make sure that I would convey to my replacement everything that she would have to know - and it got to the point where I would work five days in three days. It was just terrible.
>
> ..even though my boss said - 'don't worry if you don't give 100% service,

> go with 80% or 75%' - I was not happy with that myself. Then I found that he was disappointed in me - the expectation was still there even though he said 'don't worry about it, somehow it will get done'. Well, if I didn't do it wouldn't get done, or it would have fallen through the cracks.

Evelyn finally decided to give up the pressures and responsibilities of her position and applied for a part time junior level position instead. After considerable experimentation with various options, and with confidence in her abilities to return to previous levels of achievement if she chose to, she decided to set a boundary that would permit her to live according to her current values and interests.

> I found that I couldn't accomplish things - I was feeling pressure from the job - pressure from home. That's when I decided it was time for a change. If I had stayed, I probably would have burned myself out in a year, because I could not be happy with 85% at work and 85% at home. I didn't want to reach that point. A lot of people said, you should have taken a year's leave of absence - but I think after a year I still would have had the same problems - being pulled in those directions. I might have managed it - but, I wouldn't have been happy. Most women are fighting to get higher up and I did the total opposite of what is considered the norm.

The data reveals that the notion of personal development meant having some control over their lives in a holistic sense - work and personal. Participants equated personal development with taking on challenges and being able to give of their best while maintaining individual values. Although open to experimenting with their limitations to acquire something of value, they also drew strict boundaries beyond which they would not venture if their personal values were threatened in some way.

* * *

The themes and patterns in this chapter reflect back on the literature about experiential learning, social learning and women's development. The sections in this chapter illustrate different aspects of participants' learning from experience: self-directedness, reflective observation, active experimentation, and managing transitions. Setting their own agenda, having autonomy, creating or taking

advantage of whatever opportunities, knowledge or resources existed at the moment to help them do their work, all became a repeated, if varied, motif. These women also proved to be astute observers of their environment. Not only were they learning by observing the behaviours of others - choosing qualities to emulate or avoid - they also repeatedly reflected on their own actions and behaviours, making adjustments as the circumstances required.

Interpersonal communications and relations were often spoken of as being the most valued among their learning experiences. All the participants consistently agreed: for better or worse, interpersonal relations offered the most variety and depth to their workplace learning. Looking back on even their most difficult moments dealing with others they felt something of value had been gained. Through reflection and observation on their own behaviours and that of others, these women experimented with, and developed various approaches to help them function within their work units. Although relations with co-workers were often decisive in learning from others, the most influential force affecting their learning experiences resulted from the interpersonal dynamics with their supervisors.

The impact of technology on their learning varied in quality and kind, often reflecting the level of commitment to technology at the departmental level. The most telling stories are those where, despite any initial anxieties or resistances, these women gradually explore and integrate technology's capacity for systemizing, streamlining and communicating, thus providing significant evidence to support Zuboff's claims of the potential for an 'informated' workplace. Whether these factors in turn lead to a reintegration of clerical work with its managerial antecedents seems to depend in large part on the context and the absence of environmental constraints.

This chapter closes with some penetrating observations made by Joan. Her

perceptions of the organizational culture that had developed over the last five years due to shrinking budgets and the impact this had on what she was learning, not only about herself but those around her, foreshadows several issues relevant to many organizations navigating into the future. Her comments have implications for anyone concerned about employee satisfaction and its impact on creating and maintaining effective organizations.

> There's the frustration of dealing with the bureaucracy and people that don't seem to care. I know a lot of it is because of financial constraints - but a lot of them don't care anyway. Dealing with budgets are a very bad learning experience. I used to lie awake at night sometimes worrying about it - because I knew that we'd never make ends meet. We couldn't do all the things that needed to be done. There wasn't ever enough money - every year they cut again. It is certainly a learning experience - a very discouraging one. It's happening everywhere - not just here. It just goes on an on down the line.
>
> That's very discouraging - doing more with less all the time. The shock of realizing that people don't really count - at work - at the University. It is the bottom dollar that counts. That may be way off base, but that was certainly something that I felt I learned over the years. Not that I was ever treated that way personally. But, there's a limit to how much one person can do. No matter how hard they're trying to balance a budget, you get to a point where - say you have five people, and a new project comes in - it is split between those five people, 'cause they won't let you hire anybody else. And then another big project comes in - it's split again between those same five people. There's a point where the bucket's full and it doesn't matter whether you're there 14, 16 hours a day, you're not going to be able to do it. And nobody seems to care. I think that support staff gets the feeling after a while that the more they do - they're not going to get thanked for it - they're just going to get more put on them. If you do more - you're going to get more to do. Which is fine if you're going up the ladder and there's a lot of career moves and you're working your way into a management position or something like that and you're willing to put in those kinds of hours and do that kind of stuff to build your career. That's one thing. But for a lot of people - that's never going to happen. After a while you realize - it's just because they're short of staff. I think it's very discouraging for people. That's a learning experience. You've learned it but, boy - it's not a pleasant one - because after a while you say to hell with it. I'm going to work 9 - 5 and I'm going to take my hour for lunch and I'm going to take my coffee breaks. If it doesn't get done, too bad. Now, some people can't do that - so you work through lunch hours, and you work weekends.

It's not that your immediate superior isn't supportive - but while they're telling you you're doing a wonderful job and patting you on the back - they're giving you another huge sheaf of papers and saying - "I'm really sorry but - somebody's gotta do it - there isn't anybody else". And you get the feeling that "they" - the organization - you can't put a name to it - they, don't really care. I don't think it's because people don't care on a individual basis - I think they don't pay attention until it's too late.

Chapter 5: Reflections and Conclusion

> "Meaning is making sense of or giving coherence to our experiences... Making meaning is central to what learning is all about."
> (Mezirow, 1991 p.10-11)

> "All human activity is potentially educational in that human beings try to 'make sense' out of what they are doing, try to 'rationalize' their behaviour and the environment that promotes or constrains various actions, and to formulate 'reasoned changes'. A curricular view attempts to uncover these 'rationalizations' by systematically examining the categories and frameworks of human interests that people employ in their descriptions of their meaningful interactions with others and the environment and to draw implications for the educational value of these activities."
> (Pipan 1989, p.166)

The process orientation to learning

This study explores a process orientation to learning in the workplace from the perspective of women's experiences. By focusing on informal learning and using a qualitative approach, I hope this study sheds light on some facets of the way support staff learn and acquire competence in a specific setting.

The women in this study have taught me to value ways of knowing and learning that are often neglected in our organizations and in our society. Some of the women in this study grasped and clearly articulated a wide range of learning strategies and experiences. Other women were more tentative about describing their learning, sometimes doubting the validity of their own experiences; this was especially true of women who rarely engaged in sharing their ideas. Through the process of understanding how support staff define and articulate their learning at work, I have learned that any individual approach to learning cannot be separated from its context.

Many women in this study identified learning at work as coinciding with a pivotal stage in their work lives. The shift from doing as they were told within firm boundaries to the more autonomous, albeit riskier realm of figuring out things on their own was considered to be real and meaningful learning. Once over this threshold, they begin to describe situations in which they learn by taking action and dealing with the inherent risks of not always knowing what to expect. The findings in this study coincide with notions of 'spiral learning' (Bateson 1994) and 'significant learning' (Rogers, 1994) and confirm Bandura's (1986) research that a reciprocal relationship between individual and environment do indeed blend to create a variety of dynamic possibilities.

They are consistently keen observers who willingly reflect on, and learn from, their own successes and failures as well as that of others. As these 'personal experiences' accumulate, they begin to place greater value on them, solidifying behaviours they consider effective and discarding those that prove ineffective. Effective behaviours were those that helped get work done in a 'professional' manner while building and maintaining relatively harmonious relationships at work. Indeed, all participants considered the interpersonal sphere as their most valued learning experience. Within this realm, learning was seen as ongoing and ever changing, and distinctions between private and work lives were frequently blurred in that they would apply the learning from one setting to the other.

The interactions of support staff with others within the system, particularly supervisors, had considerable impact on their perceptions of how and what they learned. Whether or not they developed a growing sense of confidence in their own competence depended to a large degree on receiving some form of constructive feedback, regardless of the source. Feedback, if considered appropriate, provided information upon which to reflect and make adjustments in their behaviour.

'Doing what needs to be done' revisited

The patterns emerging when support staff described 'doing what needs to be done' revealed the wide range of learning strategies they used to manage their actual and assumed responsibilities.

Any typical organizational chart drawn along hierarchical lines of accountability creates the impression that support staff are dictated to from above - that supervisors tell them what to do and how to do it. That such a stage existed in their careers is not disputed, however, these women rarely associated meaningful learning at work with this stage in their careers. On the contrary, beyond representing assimilation into the workforce, they were very much aware that "doing what you were told to do" placed limitations on their ability to make what they considered to be meaningful contributions at work. The skills, attitudes and knowledge they developed through their experiences were largely imbedded in the work they performed in an environment which relied more on their ability to "get things done" and less on telling them how to do it. Typical organizational structure leads one to assume that learning is initiated from the top and not as is found in this study, from the bottom. In several cases, it was the support staff who were in the position of coaching new supervisors. The experiences of the women in this study indicate that given favourable circumstances, support staff themselves are highly capable of initiating learning experiences which help them work more effectively.

The findings of this study coincide with Brookfield's (1986) broader notions about self-directed learning. In their learning styles, the women in this study exhibited the socially independent and inner directed qualities that come with a strong sense of self-identity as well as a responsiveness to external reinforcement and consideration of the effects their learning has on others that comes with awareness of context. In fact this study corroborates Brookfield's findings that the

characteristics conducive to successful self-directed learning are also those associated with field dependent learners, or "accommodators". Participants valued those learning experiences where they were able to actively participate in an investigation of concrete experience. Learning through trial and error was usually the only option available and happened often enough to gain considerable legitimacy for them. Whether drawing upon external resources available in the environment, or internal abilities or values, thoughts and actions were usually tempered by reflecting on their experiences and observations and integrating or refining their learning as they went along. They often spoke of the ongoing nature of learning and demonstrated a sense of exploration, experimentation and even apprehension over this fact.

This study suggests that traditional organizational structure obscures the source and relevancy of some of the learning that goes on in organizations among support staff and furthermore, does not reflect the shift in roles once support staff take on more autonomous functions.

The setting and its impact on learning

Nowhere did the organizational setting prove to have a greater impact on the learning of support staff than through their relationships with supervisors. So much so that I have come to see the deliberate structuring of work relationships as inseparable from the working conditions within an organizational setting.

Referring back to the comments made earlier about the self-directed capabilities of these women, I want to emphasize again their sharp awareness of and sensitivity to context. This aptitude for observing and adapting to the needs and expectations of their environment is a vital characteristic of their proficiency for learning at work

and it is a valuable strength for coping with the constant change underway in most workplaces. If we consider the mutuality between working conditions, the environment, and context or field dependence, and regard participants' predisposition towards adaptive learning against this particular backdrop, what patterns materialise to inform us about the quality of learning going on?

The women in this study were very lucid about which aspects of their working conditions either supported or restricted learning or ongoing development, and which circumstances increased their sense of competency as opposed to diminishing it. In Chapter 4, the interview data illustrates the impact that various supervisory styles had on the quality of what support staff learned at work. If we juxtapose this data with Lennerlof's (1989) bi-polar environmental factors, what do we see? Based on the experience of participants, which working conditions prove to be favourable to learning, development of competence and personality growth and are supportive of learning competence? Which conditions nurture cognitive development, increase initiative and motivation and encourage emotional satisfaction?

Interpersonal interactions marked by open dialogue and shared information provided support staff with a sense of involvement; being contributors 'to the big picture', or part of a team. Feeling valued in relationships characterized by a high degree of trust and mutual respect promoted perceptions of being in an enriching and highly motivating environment. Support staff working in such an atmosphere tended to describe situations where dissent could be voiced, mistakes made and learned from, misunderstandings clarified, and risks taken. Highly perceptive of nuance, and capable of critical self-reflection, these women made adjustments with relative comfort and pitched in as needed. Women working under these conditions also exhibited an ability to work autonomously, sharing many similar characteristics with those who lacked the benefit of the consistent feedback provided by participative supervisors.

For women in more isolated or autonomous circumstances, knowing they had free reign and were basically trusted, albeit by somewhat distant supervisors, provided sufficient grounding from which to explore and establish their own network of resources and contacts while developing routines and creating order out of disparate duties. Mastering the changes in technology, they adapted its use to streamline their routines and explore its capabilities for providing appealing, accurate, faster and more relevant information. In common with the women who worked in a participative environment, these women felt they had influence over their work environment, their suggestions were appreciated and acted upon.

The data also reveals some clear examples of working conditions that are not favourable to learning, restrictive conditions which narrow the range of competencies and foster learned helplessness. This data also includes evidence of cognitive stagnation, passivity and despondency, if not actual depression.

Support staff who described their learning experiences in restrictive terms tended to be dealing with authoritarian supervisors. They were very conscious of being watched over and subjected to regular controls - mistakes were occasions to be reminded of incompetence and access to resources were limited. Efforts to put forward ideas, when met with steady derision, gradually subsided and they learned to keep their opinions to themselves. Under these circumstances, some of them even began to doubt their own abilities. Caught in an emotional jumble over their responsibility to their work and the struggle to imbue it with some meaning, they tried to make some sense of their experience. Anger and frustration were sometimes expressed in the same sentence with resignation. They were certainly not reluctant to share their views about the unfairness of 'the system', commenting bluntly and in detail on those who 'abused power'. These were the most obvious signs of powerlessness or helplessness among support staff. Though signs of helplessness peppered their language, especially when they spoke of withdrawing

their input; "what's the use, they don't care" or "it doesn't make any difference", I also noticed a parallel occurrence in some cases. While withdrawing to protect themselves from censure, they simultaneously focused on whatever aspect of their work which provided some meaning for them. In the context of this environment, meaning was often derived from helping those who needed or wanted help, or creating order and harmony within the constraints allotted to them.

This study clearly illustrates the central findings of Lennerlof's (1989) research: whether developing competence or restricting it, whether increasing motivation or cultivating passivity, learning is in fact always going on. By neglecting to consciously create a vital and constructive learning environment, a choice - albeit a regressive one - is still being made.

Returning to the influence that Habermas has had on broadening concepts of workplace learning, it became clear that the women in this study placed considerable value on the practical/ dialogic and self reflective/ emancipatory forms of learning. Indeed, it is principally through these forms of learning that they experience themselves as competent or otherwise. It is significant that the self reflective/ emancipatory dimension of learning manifested up to a point. The data revealed considerable evidence confirming participants' ability to be critically self reflective and to recognize the need for self change. However, when dealing with power relations under restrictive circumstances, they tended towards withdrawal into self-doubt rather than being concerned for 'achieving emancipation from control'. Given the context and the place these women have in this organizational structure, this finding confirms Bandura's (1986) comment that powerful environmental conditions as overriding determinants constrain behaviour.

Some interesting parallels also exist between the findings in this study and the stages of development Belenky (1986) discusses in "Women's Ways of Knowing". The

metaphor of voice and silence weaving through women's developmental stages and their ways of knowing are echoed in the voices of participants here. However, in the context of the workplace there is evidence that because of the need to adapt to different supervisory styles, women's "development" can move from silence to the confident expression of opinions, and back to silence again. The fact that the stages of development are defined in terms of decisive changes in relation to authority relate to the findings in this study as well. Women defined by an external authority are usually silent, passive and submissive. As they develop beyond this stage they gradually become aware of and begin to trust inner resources and authority is redefined, shifting from external authority to self. Their finding that women learn best in environments where their life experiences are validated - either by default, or by benign or knowledgeable authorities - would seem to apply to workplace settings as well. The findings of this study indicate a correlation exists between how and what women learn and environments that invalidate their experiences thereby sanctioning silence or helplessness, versus those that encourage active involvement and expression through validating their experiences.

It may be astonishing to consider that someone in a position of authority could have such a powerful impact on the quality of a subordinate's learning experiences. Managers tend to think of workers as largely responsible for their own destinies in the workplace. Based on the findings here, I now consider this line of reasoning to have a major blind spot and concur with Galbraith et al's (1993) proposition that despite rhetorical claims favouring employee involvement, managers "rarely see implications for their own behaviour... and repeatedly redefine employee involvement in ways that correspond to whatever styles of management they already practice." (p.151)

Although the topic of training did come up, it was generally considered more meaningful when it coincided with a specific task at hand. The lack of informal,

on-the-job training seemed to be more of an issue. Yet curiously, it was the very absence of on-the-job training which often compelled these women to rely on self-directed learning.

What does all this data tell us about the unique skill set women bring to workplace learning, and whether their skills are adequately singled out and rewarded? The ability to learn from observation, be self-directed, and reflect critically on self and others are vital qualities for adapting to the ever changing circumstances of the modern workplace. Rather than the current practice of defining these terms loosely or lumping them together as the 'soft skills' of 'taking initiative' or having 'excellent organizational and interpersonal skills' perhaps these terms deserve more precise definitions with subtle gradations and combinations. After all, traditional 'physical' jobs performed by men are often compensated based on the subtle definitions between how much weight they are expected to carry. Making these 'soft skills' more precise and therefore more visible would recognize the personal contribution these women make to sustaining effective organizations.

Implications and recommendations for future study

If women's learning styles and competencies at work were validated, and their experiences valued - how might it impact an organization? How might women's approaches to learning be accommodated or integrated to improve organizational effectiveness? How are women's learning styles compatible or incompatible with various organization design principles. These are some of the questions raised by the findings in this study.

We can only imagine the impact if "benign and knowledgeable authorities" nurtured and developed women's unique learning capabilities as valuable human resources

in an organization. Without such authorities, the very structure of many organizations inadvertently creates environments antithetical to eliciting the best that support staff have to offer. Organizations that claim to require employees at all levels who are capable of taking initiative and adapting to change might establish mechanisms to circumvent some of the restrictions inherent in hierarchical structuring. Since support staff are capable and resourceful self directed learners, organizations might increase the availability and accessibility of a variety of tools and resources. The development of networks or support groups that cut across hierarchical structures might encourage an environment of open dialogue and shared experience upon which learning can thrive. Since these women learn so much vicariously by observing others' behaviours and the consequences for them, the practise of publicly acknowledging and reward peers as role models sends a powerful message for behaviours to emulate. Managers known for their fair treatment and development of subordinates could similarly be recognized. Included in any evaluation of performance might be a certain percentage of a work period devoted to informal developmental activities. Setting up compensation or reward systems which acknowledge the unique skills set women contribute to the workplace might have implications for employment and pay equity. Given adequate mechanisms for dialogue support staff are capable of identifying their own learning needs, and might identify organizational solutions which are not being well addressed from the top.

The findings in this study tell us something about the limits of approaching learning from the perspective of preconceived outcomes. If resorted to exclusively, an instrumental approach to learning at work ignores the abundant day to day opportunities for reflecting on the experiences and interpersonal exchanges which contribute to enhanced effectiveness. The knowledge thus accumulated would be left largely untapped and isolated.

Future studies might include the gathering of longitudinal data that the time constraints of this study did not permit. As well the impact that unionization and/or technology might have on support staff in different environments regarding opportunities or constraints for learning would be worth exploring. Another study might look at the trend towards professionalism among secretaries and its impact on skill or personal development.

It is my hope that the findings of this study adequately explored and validated the learning that comes from the work and life experiences of the women in this setting.

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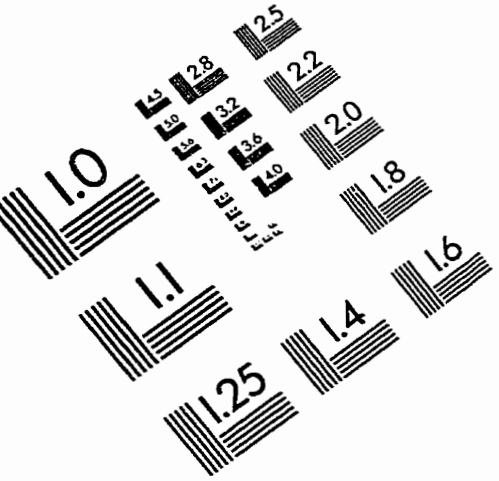
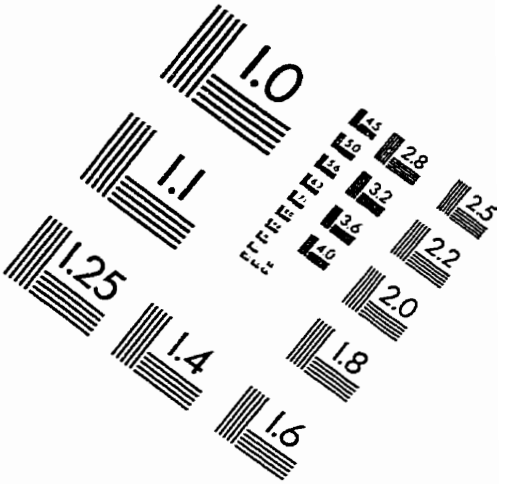
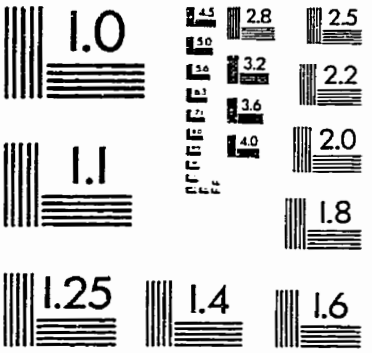
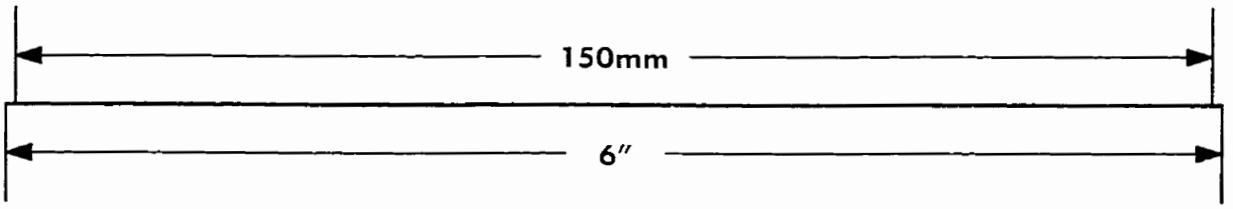
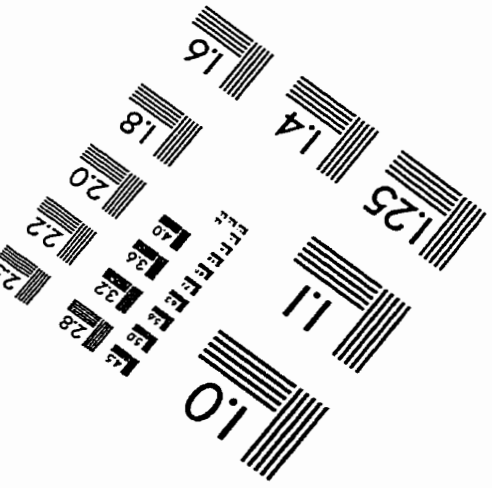
IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)

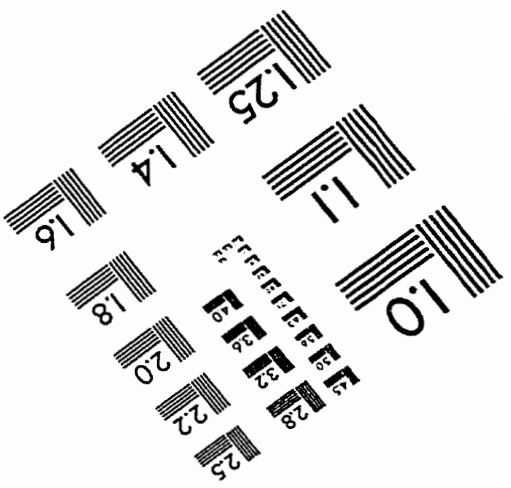












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