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1. INTRODUCTION

Many researchers emphasise the importance of interpersonal communication competence in learning, in working life, and in society in general (Daly, 1998; Morreale, Osborn and Pearson, 2000). Changes in the working life (e.g., globalisation, the development of information and communication technology, the increase in abstract, conceptual, and knowledge-intensive work, and the increase in collaborative interaction) have established new challenges to interpersonal communication competence and enhanced the essential role of communication and interaction at work (FinnSight 2015 foresight project, 2006; Huotari, Hurme and Valkonen, 2005; Kostiainen, 2003). Several studies have attempted to define the interpersonal communication competence needed in current working life in general or in specific professions, but many of these efforts remain just fragmented lists of requirements or challenges which individuals may face and should thereby be prepared (Kostiainen, 2003: 111). All in all, there is no wide-ranging consensus regarding the definition of interpersonal communication competence (Segrin and Givertz, 2003: 136). What kind of phenomenon is interpersonal communication competence and how should it be approached? What does it mean, after all, to be competent in the area of communication and social interaction at work? How can one specify when communication and interaction are competent and when they are not?

Although it seems to be obvious that interpersonal communication competence is a core competence in current working life, little research has had its primary focus on examining how interpersonal communication competence actually develops and how it is learned at work. As a matter of fact, there is much research on the development of language

and other communication skills in infancy and childhood but a lack of theories and models of the acquisition of adults' interpersonal communication competence (Greene, 2003: 57). How do people learn to communicate and interact at work? How does interpersonal communication competence develop in working life? What kinds of learning experiences are significant in the development of interpersonal communication competence, and furthermore, what can actually be learned?

The aim of this chapter is to explore the concept of interpersonal communication competence and the development of interpersonal communication competence at work. Special attention is given to the need to study individuals' experiences and perceptions of their own interpersonal communication competence and its development at work. Firstly, the research tradition of interpersonal communication competence is briefly introduced and some of the most ambiguous issues on the topic are discussed. Secondly, light is shed on the scientific discussion concerning learning at work by examining its informal, social, and experiential nature. In conclusion, some prospects for future research on the topic are offered.

2. WHAT IS INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE?

There has been a vast research interest in interpersonal communication competence, and many scholars in communication and other fields (e.g., psychology, socio-linguistics, education, and management) have studied interpersonal communication competence within various relational, institutional, and cultural life contexts (Valkonen, 2003: 26–27; Wilson and Sabee, 2003: 3). The range of existing theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches is thereby wide and, by the same token, very diverse. Interpersonal communication competence has been examined, for instance, from the approaches of individual's traits and situation-specific communication behaviour, the relational level of communication and interaction, the interrelationship between individual and society, and the ethics of communication and interaction (Valkonen, 2003: 27).

The concept of interpersonal communication competence is widely in use, and the meaning of it varies from field to field and from situation to situation. In addition, a phenomenon of interpersonal communication competence has been referred to with many concepts as *communication competence*, *social competence*, and *relational competence*. In many cases the concept of *skills* has also been used in place of competence (Segrin and Givertz, 2003: 136; Spitzberg and Dillard, 2002: 89; Valkonen, 2003: 25–

28). While different concepts are often used synonymously and interchangeably to describe the area (Hargie and Dickson, 2004: 4), some disparities can also be perceived. For example, according to Valo (1995: 76), social skills (e.g., voting, standing in a line) can be thought to be more extensive than interpersonal communication skills, and, according to Valkonen (2003: 25–26), communication competence can be perceived as a wider concept than interpersonal communication competence and competence as a wider concept than skills. However, interrelationships between different concepts are not just that simple, and, as Hargie (1997: 13) has pointed out, it is also possible to argue that skills subsume competence.

Despite many insightful efforts, there is no wide-ranging consensus regarding the question what interpersonal communication competence is (Wilson and Sabee, 2003: 35). However, there are some issues most scholars in the field of speech communication agree on. For instance, many researchers, including Rubin (1990), Spitzberg (2006), and Wilson and Sabee (2003), suggest that interpersonal communication competence is composed of three broad sets of factors: *knowledge*, *skills*, and *motivation*. In other words, it is suggested that competence is composed of cognitive, behavioural, and affective dimensions. In addition, the majority of research has focused basically on two criteria, *effectiveness* and *appropriateness*, by which these three components of competence can be assessed (Segrin and Givertz, 2003: 136) and to which most other relevant evaluative criteria of competence can be presented as subordinate (Spitzberg, 2006: 6).

Consequently, interpersonal communication competence is quite often proposed to be a compound of knowledge about effective and appropriate communication and interaction (for instance related to communication and interaction strategies, processes, and norms), a repertoire of interpersonal communication skills that enable effective and appropriate communication and interaction (e.g., delivery and listening skills, presentation and group communication skills), and motivation to communicate and interact in ways that can be viewed as both effective and appropriate (see e.g., Rubin, 1990: 96). In addition, a meta-cognitive level of communication and interaction (required in planning, controlling, and analysing communication and interaction) and ethics of communication and interaction (including a capacity for moral responsibility and desire to respect interpersonal trust) can be subsumed to the definition of interpersonal communication competence (Valkonen, 2003: 26). Different dimensions of competence are inextricably linked and separable only at a theoretical level (Valkonen, 2003: 39). Yet, there

are numerous researches which have concentrated on defining and classifying merely communication and interaction skills (Almeida, 2004: 358; Spitzberg, 2000: 104).

Because same behaviours are evaluated differently by different interactants in different contexts, it can be argued that behaviours themselves are not competent or incompetent (Spitzberg and Brunner, 1991: 32). Following for instance Spitzberg (2000, 2006), interpersonal communication competence should therefore be considered as *an impression* which actors and co-actors form about effectiveness and appropriateness of their own and of their co-actors' communication and interaction, rather than an ability or a set of behaviours per se. In other words, it is suggested that competence should be perceived to be relative and subjective construct which is also affected by context (Spitzberg and Brunner, 1991; Spitzberg and Dillard, 2002: 92).

Naturally, the inference of competence depends on the source of assessment (e.g., actor, co-actor, third-party observer, assessment instrument, or researcher) (Spitzberg, 2000: 113; Wilson and Sabee, 2003: 15). Hence, one of the most interesting questions in the area is from whose perspective interpersonal communication competence should be approached. All the different perspectives are doubtless necessary, but how can one select the most appropriate point of view to fit a specific research need? What kind of understanding do these different perspectives produce from the phenomenon, and further, how do these kinds of different definitions reflect various cultural and individual values?

Other-report techniques of interpersonal communication competence have concentrated basically on skills, because skills are the most observable part of competence (Spitzberg, 2006: 6; Valkonen, 2003: 38). However, examining experiences, attributes, and self-perceptions of the actor's own interpersonal communication competence is highly important, because these accounts can be a rich source of information about feelings, intentions, beliefs, and judgments which may further have an influence on the actor's performance (Almeida, 2004: 363; Wilson and Sabee, 2003: 15). It has regularly been critically remarked that individuals are not the most reliable judges of their own competence and that their actual performance and self-perceptions do not necessarily coincide (e.g., Carrell and Willmington, 1996; Kruger and Dunning, 1999). Even then, examining personal experiences and self-perceived competence is warranted, because self-inferences of competence – and of incompetence as well – may impact on an individual's self-esteem and motivation to communicate and thereby affect the behavioural course of an individual's pursuits (e.g., Wilson and Sabee, 2003: 16). As Hewes (1995: 1) has

summarised it: *'How we see our world determines, in part, what we will think, how we will feel, and how we will act.'*

3. LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT AT WORK

Learning and development are closely connected to current working life and to scientific and societal discussion about work. Generally speaking, competence requirements are increasingly demanding in actual constantly changing working life. Continuous learning is therefore required from all professionals, and learning can be seen as a natural aspect of working itself. All in all, learning at work is a very complex and multidimensional phenomenon and it has been studied from various perspectives (Collin, 2002; Paloniemi, 2006). Despite its eclectic nature, learning at work is next approached by concentrating merely on its informal, social, and experiential characteristics.

– The informal aspects of learning at work.
Many researchers have focused on formal education, and much is known about teaching and being taught. In contrast, there is relatively little research on informal learning and learning at work, even if many researchers have become interested in these forms of learning alongside with formal education during last two decades. Formal and informal learning are ambiguous concepts, and they are frequently used in literature without any clear definition (Livingstone, 2001). However, *formal learning at work* refers generally to intentionally constructed learning activities for example within the domain of human resource development. Instead, *informal learning at work* refers generally to unplanned, unorganised, and unintentional learning which simply occurs at the context of work. Informal learning plays an important role in developing professional expertise at work (Conlon, 2003: 283). Following Malcolm, Hodkinson, and Colley (2003), it could be appropriate to consider formal and informal learning as attributes of learning (formality and informality) present in all circumstances of learning, rather than polarised and discrete learning environments. Hence, it could also be reasonable to describe learning at work by focusing on its informal nature per se, not just by emphasizing the informal aspects of the learning context in question.

– The social aspects of learning at work.
The second central theme within the debate on learning at work is its social nature. Social participation within work communities can be seen as the key to learning at work. It has been argued that a notable part of learning at work occurs as a result of social interaction and that the meaning of colleagues and work relationships in learning at work cannot be overestimated. All in all, people learn much from others at work. They, for instance, ask for advice, negotiate and construct meanings together, consider issues in teams and at meetings, and collaboratively create new knowledge (Boud and Middleton, 2003; Collin, 2002; Wenger, 1998).

– The experiential aspects of learning at work.
Numerous theories on learning at work have underlined the importance of experiences as the main source of work competence (Paloniemi, 2006: 440), and it has been argued that all informal learning is predominantly experiential (Conlon, 2003). On the whole, there has been a wide-ranging interest in studying learning from experience over the centuries, and many well-known scholars, including John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, David Kolb, and David Boud, have been interested in the role of experiences in learning – either as a source or as a way of learning. All in all, the importance of experiences in learning has been greatly highlighted and it has been argued that experience is the central element of all learning (Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993: 8).

Although examining learning and experiences has a long history, there is no consensual opinion regarding the relationship between these phenomena. One of the difficulties related to their connections is the notion that all experiences are potential learning experiences, but there is no formula that guarantees learning from experience (Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993: 8–9). All in all, it seems to be axiomatic that individuals do not directly learn from experiences but from the meanings they give to their experiences (Seibert, 1996: 262). It also seems to be obvious that it is possible to explore nothing but these subjective interpretations of experiences, not experiences per se. Another difficulty in studying learning experiences relates to individuals' capability to remember and describe their experiences. It is often underlined that describing one's own competence used and needed at work as well one's own learning and development is not an easy task (Boud and Solomon, 2003: 326; Paloniemi, 2006: 442). However, studying self-perceptions of learning at work and of oneself as a learner is highly important, because these

perceptions may affect one's learning in future (Rauste-von Wright, von Wright and Soini, 2003: 137).

4. CONCLUSION: DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The importance of interpersonal communication competence in current working life is increasingly highlighted (FinnSight 2015 foresight project, 2006; Huotari, Hurme and Valkonen, 2005), and in many professions the bulk of the work is based on communication and interaction. Thus, interpersonal communication competence cannot be thought of as only a useful accessory tool, but it should be realised that communication and interaction are, by definition, typical ways of working. Interpersonal communication competence is all-important, for example, in the work of teachers, leaders, politicians, and researchers, but it is comprehensively needed to succeed virtually in any profession. Interpersonal communication competence relates to both verbal and nonverbal communication between two or more human beings. It is required for creating and sharing meanings in various work situations, including different kinds of dyads, groups and public speaking contexts. Next to the face-to-face situations people encounter at work, interpersonal communication competence is needed in the context of technologically mediated communication and interaction.

Although communication scholars disagree about how much interpersonal communication competence can change over time, the general idea that it can develop and be developed is widely accepted (Greene, 2003: 51; Hargie and Dickson, 2004: 7). Interpersonal communication competence can develop both formally and informally. Even if some parts of interpersonal communication competence needed in working life (e.g., problem solving, negotiation, and conflict management skills) may require formal communication education (Huotari, Hurme and Valkonen, 2005: 43), it can be argued that most of interpersonal communication competence is acquired informally across the lifespan (Segrin and Givertz, 2003: 137). Yet, research has concentrated on the development of interpersonal communication competence in formal education and in infancy and childhood. Thus far, there is a lack of theories and models of the development of interpersonal communication competence in adulthood (Greene, 2003: 57). Furthermore, little research has had its primary focus on examining how interpersonal communication competence develops particularly at work. Nevertheless, in the light of existing research and current changes in working life, it seems to be

obvious that there is a fundamental need for research on the development of interpersonal communication competence at work.

Researching the development of interpersonal communication competence by addressing to informal learning is highly important given that 1) a notable part of learning, arguably most of it, occurs outside the classroom, informally (e.g., Boud and Middleton, 2003: 194); 2) the overwhelming majority of significant learning experiences takes place in informal learning, not in formal education (Merriam and Clark, 1993: 133); 3) arguably the greatest share of interpersonal communication competence is acquired through informal learning (Segrin and Givertz, 2003: 137); and 4) informal learning environments seem to be appropriate and motivating, especially when it comes to learning interpersonal communication (Kostiainen, 2003: 202). Examining informal learning particularly at work is also important, because work is the most important learning environment for many adults (FinnSight 2015 foresight project, 2006: 61; Paloniemi, 2006: 447). Furthermore, exploring especially individuals' experiences and perceptions of their own interpersonal communication competence and its development at work is necessary, because, according to Paloniemi (2006), experiences are highly essential in competence and learning at work. In fact, it is frequently underlined that there is a need for future research on approaching the nature of informal learning at work from the perspective of individual experiences (e.g., Collin, 2002: 147; Livingstone, 2001).

Future research is needed to connect the distinct research traditions of interpersonal communication competence and learning at work. So far communication and interaction have been mentioned in the research area of learning at work mainly when highlighting the social aspects of learning. Although the role of communication and interaction in learning at work is unquestionably important and people are *communicating and interacting to learn*, research also needs to take account of *learning to communicate and interact at work*. Future research could also assist in analysing the phenomenon of learning at work and its informal, social, and experiential aspects from the perspective of speech communication and social interaction. Learning at work is increasingly important in modern society, and it could be instructive to explore it from the perspective in which communication and interaction are approached both as the subjects of learning and as the ways of learning. Further research is also needed in order to develop theoretical and empirical ways to explore the development of interpersonal communication competence at work.

This chapter is based on the author's PhD research, which still is under construction. The aim of the research is to describe and understand the development of interpersonal communication competence in the work of postdoctoral researchers working in the public sector. The research focuses on experiences and perceptions which researchers have related to the development of their own interpersonal communication competence at work. The theoretical value of the research is in improving the understanding of the nature of interpersonal communication competence in the work of researchers and of the human being as a learner of interpersonal communication competence. Although the research is based on the hermeneutical interest of knowledge as such, it is desired that research results could also be applied in developing working life (e.g., in recognizing and supporting informal learning while not formalizing it and in developing work environments and practices which enable informal learning). Because a more profound understanding of the acquisition of adults' interpersonal communication competence is needed in planning and implementing formal education, it is desired that research findings could also be applied in developing formal communication education. Nevertheless, this research is just a single attempt to understand the development of interpersonal communication competence at work and much more research from different perspectives and approaches is needed to deepen the understanding on the topic.

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