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Current Organisational Learning Theories

The current organisational learning literature focuses on the contributions of Argyris and Schön (1978) with their conceptualisation of learning being based on the assumption that people learn in one of two ways:

Single Loop Learning

"In these examples, members of the organization respond to changes in the internal and external environments of the organization by detecting errors which they then correct so as to maintain the central features of organizational theory-in-use" (Argyris and Schön 1978, p. 19)

The model explains that people learn when they are completing their usual jobs and then make a mistake which results in an error. It is through working out what the error was and how to correct it that people do not create the same error again. This, according to Argyris and Schön is how people learn.

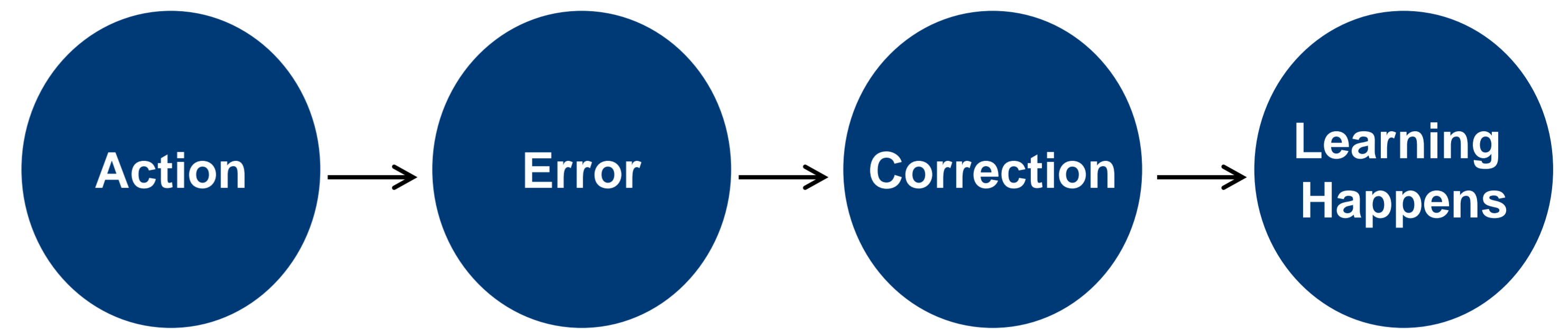


Fig.1 Single Loop Learning

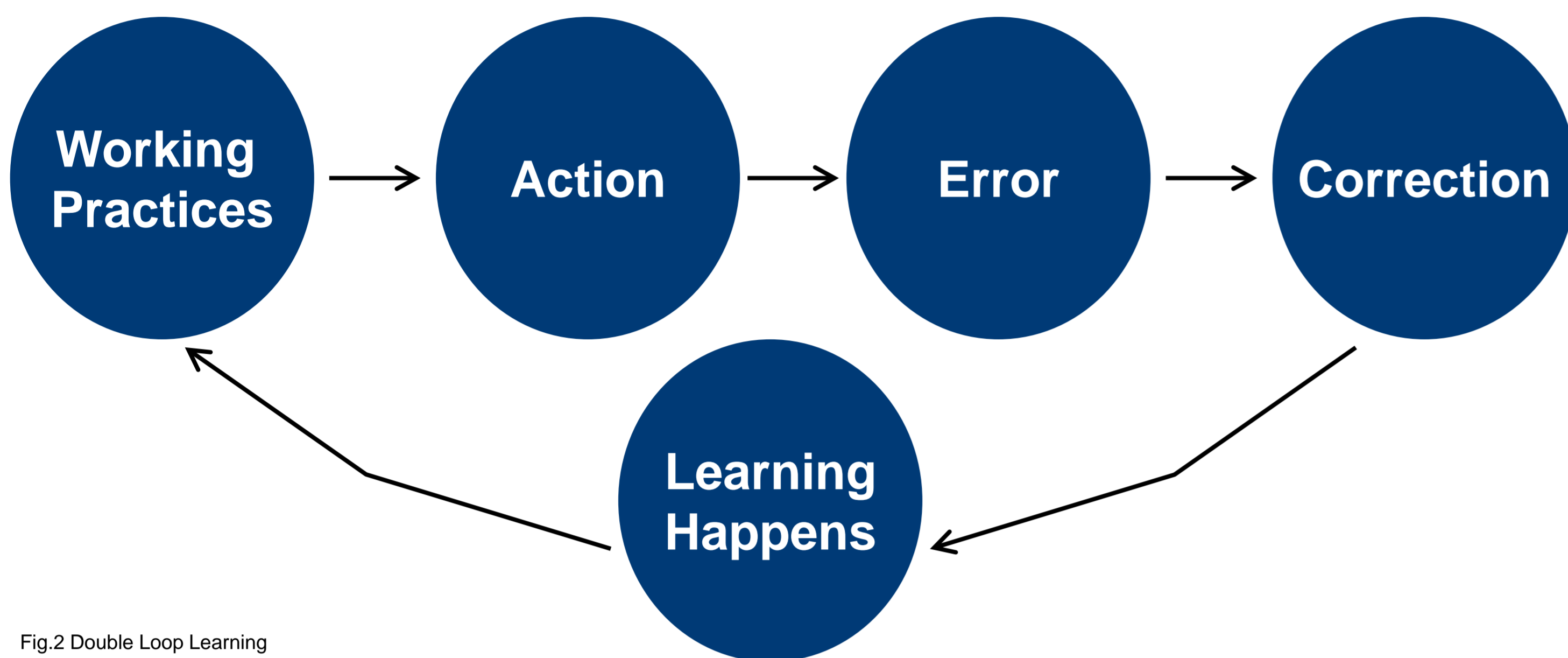


Fig.2 Double Loop Learning

Double Loop Learning

Whilst slightly more involved than single loop learning, double loop learning is still an inherently simplistic process. The only addition to single loop learning that it offers is the acceptance that context and working practices can and do impact interaction and learning at work. The double loop learning model relies on the same action, error, correction structure but rather than the individual just accepting their fault and not doing it again, they learn from it and use the experience to amend the practices of the organisation to prevent the error from being made by others.

Similarly to single loop learning, this more complex model does not allow or offer any explanation of how people learn. It is merely assumed that through the action of amending practices to prevent an error repeating itself then learning occurs. This assumption implies that learning happens almost by accident.

Similar to Argyris and Schön, other research (see Huber 1991, Tsang 1997) has been produced that is largely oversimplified and somewhat systematic. As a result of this, the proposed theory cannot be applied to any type of learning that does not involve a systematic "trial and error" approach where there are distinct errors that can be rectified, for example, it is not capable of explaining notions of self directed learning due to its reliance on peoples happenstance finding of errors and the lack of consideration of motivational factors involved in learning. The basis of this literature is in the use of "traditional" quantitative research methods, given this, I would argue that the methods, rather than being driven by an ontological and epistemological position which would inform an understanding of learning, emerge as a way of gathering large data sets, which is largely indicative of the time in which the research was completed. Due to this, the theory fails in its explanatory power to provide a comprehensive explanation of how individuals learn.

Further to this, Argyris and Schön (1978), explain that "we have not been able to find in our experience or to draw from the literature descriptions of O-II [double loop] learning" (p.147). This in itself is problematic as the model claims that it offers an explanation of how people learn when in fact the research on which the model is based has not found any examples of learning. Whilst this potentially nullifies the model it also infers that throughout all their research, Argyris and Schön have not seen one organisation that has adapted, evolved or changed as a result of its employees learning something. So if the proposers of the model are unable to find "a degree of concreteness" (p.147) to support their theory then what value does it have?

Distributed Models of Learning

In response to these systematically oversimplified theories of how people learn, more distributed models of learning have emerged that have led to the consideration of the context in which knowledge is both obtained and used as important factors in the learning process (see Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998, Billet 2001). In line with this notion of distributed learning and contrasting traditional and restrictive theories of learning within organisations, Billet (2001) explains that "learning is an activity requiring effort" (p. 30) therefore it is expected that in order for an individual to put the effort in they are motivated and engaged with the subject matter that they are learning about, rather than relying on them finding or causing an error.

Situated Learning

Further to Lave and Wenger (1991), I would argue that learning is constructed by activity, context and culture and so individuals cannot learn in an abstract and context-free manner as the model of learning outlined above would imply.

The assumptions of this model are that knowledge is embedded within the practices of a community. When somebody new joins the community with no knowledge of the existing practices they are a peripheral participant. To become a full participant of the community they must be able to understand the practices of the community and be able to influence and change these to suit. It is when the individual has learned the existing practices that they are able to do this.

This model focuses on the learning of knowledge in its context and for this reason, situated learning tends to be an unintentional method of "learning by doing" rather than a deliberate transmission-style learning and teaching method. As the knowledge does not come from structured "teachers", it instead comes from the "old-timers" in the community who have contributed to the shared knowledge.

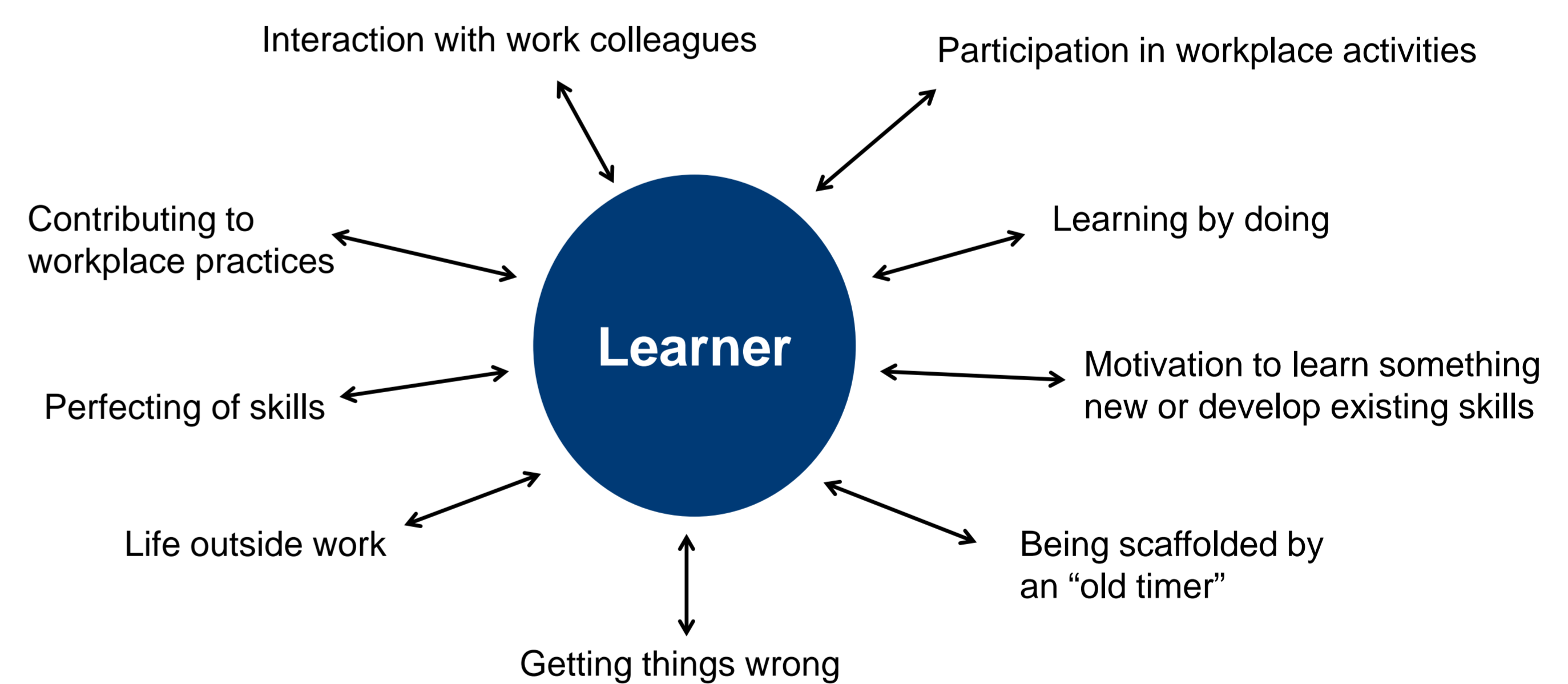


Fig.3 Situated Learning in a Workplace Environment

Contextual Learning at Work

Similarly to Lave and Wenger's model of Situated Learning, Billet (2004) proposes that learning within a workplace is driven by context and "mediated by both the contributions of workplaces and individuals' agency" (p. 109).

Once again, in contrast to the models of single and double loop learning, Billet explains that learning is not necessarily something that can be structured into formal teacher-learner events and is constructed as individuals engage in social practices. Workplace social practices lead individuals to think and act and it is through engaging in thinking and acting that knowledge is added to, adapted and changed. As such, thinking and acting become "indistinguishable from learning" (Billet 2004, p. 111). In a workplace environment, it is likely that most thinking and acting will be reiterative of daily tasks; in this case, the learner would be becoming more specialised in their task completion.

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