

EXPANDED ABSTRACT

Learning trajectories in informal settings. The case of three insertion companies

In contemporary societies, uncertainty (Bauman, 2007; Beck, 2006) is especially prevalent in unstable professional trajectories that lack solid referents. Labor flexibility, the temporality of workers, reductions in working hours and decreases in the cost of dismissals (De Cuyper et al., 2011) are some of the elements that promote truncated professional trajectories. This context increases the 'precariat' (Standing, 2001) and the vulnerability of the workforce.

The labor market is sometimes aware of these circumstances and, in some contexts, is more or less organized in trying to generate learning processes and personal and professional growth to reduce or eliminate vulnerable conditions. Insertion companies are a clear example of an attempt to address this issue. These third-sector organizations are learning structures in a commercial context. They encourage disadvantaged people to access ordinary employment. By offering a job contract for a period of time that is less than three years, regulated by the Organic Law 44/2007 of the 13th of December, these insertion companies facilitate the worker's transition to the ordinary labor market with protected employment. García Maynar (2007) noted the relevance and the effort that these companies should make to operate within a network, productively strengthen themselves and differentiate themselves from other social interventions.

This article presents partial results of a study done to determine what and how insertion workers learn as they go through these companies.

To meet this aim, a longitudinal study based on the learning trajectories model of Eraut (2009) and Eraut & Hirsh (2007) was carried out at three insertion companies over four years. Through the description and analysis of training and learning processes, this model analyses both implicit knowledge and the knowledge intentionally acquired in professional settings.

The fieldwork refers to the analysis carried out in three insertion companies, two of them located in Valencia and another one in Madrid. We visited each company three times, with varying intervals of 9-12 months. We have applied different methodologies to analyze how integration workers learn: (1) documentary analysis, which includes both academic references and internal insertion company documentation; (2) nonparticipant observation of processes and relationships in the workplace; and (3) semistructured interviews with accompanying workers, production workers and insertion workers. The analysis of the three insertion companies allowed us to observe 14 insertion workers in depth in

real work situations. Observation covered between one and three working days per person, depending on the phase of recruitment and the time of year the field study was conducted. There were also a total of 70 interviews.

There are some similarities among insertion companies analyzed in this study: (1) insertion companies are promoted by religious entities with vast experience in the third sector; (2) although insertion workers' profiles are diverse, all of them have a lower index of employability at the beginning of their recruitment. Among the differences, we highlight (1) the type of company: one is a cooperative, and two are limited liability companies; and (2) the production purpose: one is dedicated to laundry-dry cleaning, and two are dedicated to the collection and treatment of waste.

In relation to 'what is learned', the analyzed categories emphasize the orientation to learning productive processes and learning social and personal development. Regarding 'how it is learned', Eraut (2009) introduces three categories that are used in the analysis of insertion companies' learning processes: learning as a collateral effect, learning incorporated into other processes and intentional learning

We started from two initial assumptions: (1) 'what is learned': the possibility of finding employment at the end of the contract with these companies increases to a greater extent when the learning processes generated in the insertion companies are aimed at expanding social and personal growth; (2) 'how it is learned': learning activities that are incorporated into other processes, usually productive in nature, are the most common formula for approaching new knowledge and are used to a greater extent than are techniques that involve intentional learning or learning as a collateral effect.

The results allow us to prove our first assumption. In each of the three insertion companies, workers had little difficulty in achieving technical competencies, though these usually had limited professional significance; in standardized processes whose main challenges are to achieve an adequate speed in performing the task; in having the minimum communicative competencies needed to pay attention and understand task instructions; and in accountability of performance. At the same time, productive processes are relevant. Company 1, a paradigm of effectiveness and efficiency in the sector, is the leader in productive transformation among insertion companies. Company 2 emphasizes social and personal growth and is in the process of transforming its processes to strengthen efficiency and effectiveness. Company 3 also stands out for the value given to work, as it puts great effort into ensure productive progress in effort and discipline. However, the learning processes related to social and personal development are those intersectional competencies that seem to generate a greater chance of ordinary employment (employment that rarely benefits from access to technical professional skills and that has reduced transferability to other labor contexts). Moreover, special emphasis is placed on processes of self-evaluation and self-direction, on the management of one's own emotions and on social skills that deal with questions

related to the development of work and to conflicts that may arise during work. In addition, opportunities to become aware of the context, situation, and other people involved are offered, as well as opportunities to understand the relationships and values of the organization itself.

In relation to our second assumption, we can say that it is partially proved. Processes that are learned as a collateral effect are not the most significant, largely because of the simplicity of the productive processes in these institutions, which mostly provide jobs requiring low levels of qualification. Instead, it is in the learning activities incorporated into other processes, as we expected, and in the intentional learning processes, that spaces are more frequently generated to gain new knowledge. This is undoubtedly a relevant contribution because the percentage of workers who transition to ordinary employment after going through an insertion company is comparable to the percentage of those who transition to ordinary employment but do not go through an insertion company during unemployment, demonstrating the benefit of being associated with these institutions.

KEYWORDS: Insertion companies, vulnerability, learning trajectories, inclusion, employment.