

Why do more advanced apprentices ask more questions and request more help than others at the workplace?

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Whenever learning is conceived as resulting from a successful transmission of knowledge, questions raised by the learner are generally considered as signals of either bad communication by the teacher or, more often, of bad understanding of the message by the learner. In those models of learning emphasizing the active role of the learner, such as constructivism or self-regulated learning, questions and requests raised by the learner have received a more positive status.

At the workplace, apprentices are supposed to learn their profession without much teaching; questions should therefore logically be welcome and facilitated. Our observations, collected both from 65 hours of recordings of car mechanics apprentices at work and through questionnaires, show however that, if apprentices do indeed ask more questions at the workplace than at the vocational school, many organizational and psychological reasons tend to keep the number of actual questions and requests lower than what apprentices would have liked to. Our observations also show that beginners ask less questions than more advanced apprentices and that the nature of questions and requests change over the years. These evolutions can be related in part to the kind of tasks given to the apprentices in their different years of training and to the physical settings in which they have to be accomplished, on the one hand, but also to the evolution of the position and status of the apprentice over his four years of training within the same company. These results will be interpreted in light of the guided learning framework (Billett, 2000; Rogoff & Gardner, 1984) and of the legitimate peripheral participation model (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and discussed within the interaction of affordance and engagement model recently proposed by Billett (2001).