How Does Self-Direction within Learning Operate to Affect Idea Generation in SME Contexts?

Abstract

Extant literature draws numerous links between aspects of human resource development (HRD) activity and organisational creativity/innovation, noting that investments in learning positively impact creative output. Within this research base, studies suggest that the ability to self-direct learning activity can influence creative performance, but we do not yet understand how such processes operate, particularly in small-medium enterprise (SME) contexts. Given the positive economic and social impacts generated by SMEs, themselves often being sources of breakthrough product or service innovation, this is an important research problem which requires our collective attention. This paper argues that while the ability to self-direct learning activity does contribute to the generation of ideas in SME contexts, the presence of multiple stakeholder voices in the learning conversation suggests that learning is better conceptualised as co- rather than self-directed. This study finds that co-directed approaches to learning operate through a mechanism termed 'participative dialogue', whereby both employees and managers contribute to learning conversations. It also highlights the role of employee critical self-appraisal in driving self-directedness and contributing to the generation of ideas. Findings ultimately suggest that co-direction of learning benefits idea generation because such approaches facilitate the emergence of unexpected patterns of thinking, which drive the divergence that creativity depends upon.

Key words: HRD, Creativity, Idea generation, Self-directed learning, Co-directed learning, Qualitative, Exploratory

Word count: 10,410

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Introduction

Creativity, innovation, and learning are central to organisational success (Allocca & Kessler, 2006; Chien, Lin & Ya-Hui Lien, 2015; Herrera, 2015; van Rooij & Merkebu, 2015). In a world increasingly dominated by knowledge work (Lund Manyika, & Ramaswamy, 2012; McIver, Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, & Ramachandran, 2013) and information flows, the management of these, often intangible, attributes takes on increasing importance (Jimenéz-Jimenéz & Sanz-Valle, 2005; Shipton, West, Dawson, Birdi, & Patterson, 2006). Creativity is often defined as the production or development of novel, and organisationally useful ideas (Amabile, Conti, Coon, & Lazenby, 1996; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993). Built from lateral (De Bono, 1970) or divergent (Klijn & Tomic, 2010; Penaluna, Coates, & Penaluna, 2010) thinking, creativity is by its very nature an elusive, enigmatic and disruptive concept. In an organisational context creative ideas may arise in connection with numerous issues, these include the introduction of new products or services, marketing or branding, operational processes or efficiencies, or the decision to target particular markets, amongst others. Without a flow of new ideas, the creative process flounders as there can be no idea development or elaboration (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017). This paper therefore places its focus on idea 'generation' (Kijkuit & van den Ende, 2007).

Small-medium enterprises (SMEs) are of significant economic importance and face increasing pressures to create (Hotho & Champion, 2011; Vinck, 2014). Constrained by available resources (Hessels & Parker, 2013; Woschke, Haase, & Kratzer, 2017), and facing increasingly competitive contexts, creativity often links directly to the development of competitive advantage in these firms (McAdam, Moffett, Hazlett, & Shevlin, 2010). Studies link a variety of factors to an organisation's capacity to create, and this body of work extends

into the human resource management (HRM) field (Binyamin & Carmeli, 2010; De Saá-Pérez & Díaz-Díaz, 2010; Gupta & Singhal, 1993; Jimenéz-Jimenéz & Sanz-Valle, 2005; Shipton et al, 2006). Within this territory, scholars have begun to investigate human resource development (HRD) practices, arguing for linkages between learning activity and success within the creative process (Saunders, Gray, & Goregaokar, 2014). Further examples of such studies variously explore learning at both an individual and organisational level (see, for example, Cirella, Canterino, Guerci, & Shani, 2016; Huber, 1998; Kim & Wilemon, 2007; McLean, 2005; Saunders et al, 2014; Waight, 2005), with Hirst, Van Knippenberg and Zhou (2009) and De Clercq, Rahman, and Belausteguigoitia (2017) both linking learning orientations to improved creative outcomes.

Interestingly, debates concerning HRD suggest a positive linkage between self-directed learning activity (SDL) and organisational creativity (Abbot & Dahmus, 1992; Guglielmino, Guglielmino, & Long, 1987; Karakas & Manisaligil, 2012; Mitlacher, Beitler, & Faller, 2005). Commonly understood as a process in which individuals take initiative throughout the learning process (Brookfield, 2009, Ellinger, 2004; Hashim, 2008; Knowles, 1975), the notion that providing a significant role for employees within learning in order to foster creativity is intriguing. However, as SMEs are typically subject to significant resource constraints (Hessels & Parker, 2013; Valentim, Lisboa, & Franco, 2016; Woschke et al, 2017), how may they facilitate employee directed development, if, by its very nature, SDL necessitates employee led exploration which may be construed as a sub-optimal use of the SME's resource? Exploring how SMEs may facilitate self-directedness in resource constrained contexts motivates this present paper. The aim of this study is to explore how self-directedness within learning may influence idea generation in the somewhat paradoxical situation where SMEs need to carefully manage limited resources, whilst also, if

contemporaneous theories are proved correct, permitting employees the freedom to direct their own learning activity.

Theoretical Background

Human Resource Development in Small-Medium Enterprises

Our present literature base indicates that there are similarities between the conceptualisations of HRM and HRD practices in SME settings. HRM in smaller organisational settings is typically characterised as informal and ad hoc in nature (Altinay, Altinay, & Gannon, 2008; Harney & Dundon, 2006; Marlow, 2006; Mayson & Barrett, 2006), although it is still believed that it is positively linked to performance and innovation in these contexts (Sheehan, 2014). Whilst recognising that HRD differs from HRM (Werner, 2014), HRD in SME contexts is nevertheless also characterised as informal and ad hoc (Gray, 2006; Tam & Gray, 2016a). It is typically seen as unplanned and reactive (Saunders et al, 2014), targeted at the resolution of immediate problems (Hoque & Bacon, 2006), rather than long term development. While somewhat dated as a source, Stewart and Beaver (2004) provide a useful overview of prior research into HRD within small organisations, arguing that we must not assume that models and frameworks of HRD developed in larger organisations can be transposed into their smaller counterparts. SMEs are not small versions of large businesses.

Despite the prevailing opinion that HRD in smaller organisations is often less sophisticated than in larger settings (Saunders et al, 2014), sources nevertheless link the provision of training and learning to improvements in performance (Fox, 2013; Gray, 2006; Tam & Gray, 2016a; Tam & Gray, 2016b). Indeed, indicating that informality may be an asset rather than a liability for the SME, studies have shown a perception that informal training is strongly linked to improvements in SME performance (Jones, Beynon, Pickernell & Packham, 2013).

In producing a useful review of the linkages between HRD and performance in SME settings, Le (2015) draws from a number of sources which variously highlight positive links between HRD and performance in Taiwan (Huang, 2001), the UK (Jayawarna, Macpherson & Wilson, 2007), and the EU (Aragón-Sánchez, Barba-Aragon & Sanz-Valle, 2003). Importantly, this weight of evidence suggests that such findings have global relevance, rather than being bound to any one specific national business system or culture. Irrespective of this, others argue that SMEs can fail to recognise the impact of learning (Rowden, 1995). Whilst there is a significant body of scholarly work that explores the relationship between HRD and SME performance, Rowden (1995) argues that owner/managers fail to credit HRD as having had a positive impact on the SME.

Linkages between Human Resource Development and Creativity / Innovation

While there is an acknowledged lack of research exploring HRD in SME contexts (Nolan & Garavan, 2016), a number of published studies do consider, either empirically or conceptually, the relationship between learning/HRD and creativity/innovation. Before progressing further it is important to present clear definitions of creativity and innovation in order to avoid conceptual confusion. Having defined creativity as the production of novel and useful ideas (Amabile et al, 1996; Shalley et al, 2004; Woodman et al, 1993) during the introduction, models of the creative process (Kijkuit & van den Ende, 2007) separate it into a number of stages. Creativity begins with a process of idea *generation*, a stage whereby a novel thought comes into existence through a combination of data, knowledge and individual experience (Banks, Calvey, Owen & Russell, 2002). The initial thought and novel concept is then fleshed out and given detail in a *developmental* stage, before the creative process culminates in idea *selection* where ideas are screened and decisions are made before *implementation* (innovation) occurs (Amabile et al, 1996). Creativity is therefore about idea

production, whilst innovation is about idea implementation. Whilst linkages exist between the concepts it is important not to conflate the two terms. As the introduction notes, this paper places its focus on idea *generation* as a distinct part of the creative process.

Returning to the HRD literature base, studies argue that organisational learning can be a source of innovation, with Tam and Gray (2016b) finding a higher prevalence of group learning among SMEs at a high growth stage. Innovations may arguably be brought about in such situations because the application of organisational learning mechanisms assists in developing climates that are supportive of creativity (Cirella et al, 2016). When considering how individual level learning may relate to organisational outcomes, Argyris (1999) argues that scholars must take into account the interplay between employees as learning 'agents' and the actions of higher level organisational entities. Organisations themselves cannot learn (Argyris, 1999). They rely on individuals, acting on their behalf, to generate new knowledge with Cirella et al (2016) indicating that success within this arena is therefore predicated on organisations collecting, analysing, storing and disseminating employee derived learning. Organisations therefore require supportive architecture, with sources such as Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (1997) and Senge (1990) indicating that this can be rooted in factors such as culture and vision.

Further sources argue that learning is crucial to the innovation process (Saunders et al, 2014), with McLean (2005) in particular noting that part of HRD's focus in facilitating change can assist in nurturing cultures supportive of creativity/innovation. The notion of HRD having an important role in culture development also resonates within more recent literature, where Kidwell, Eddleston, and Kellermanns (2018) argue that important values can be passed down within family firms through social learning and the presence of a learning culture. Interesting

and important though these findings may be, it is important to recognise that whilst the literature base draws links between HRD and innovation within the SME, substantially less has been written about creativity. This is in spite of our knowledge that creativity is a precursor to successful innovation (McLean, 2005). Studies focusing specifically on creativity, such as this present inquiry, should therefore help to enrich our understandings.

Reinforcing the point made above, further important studies such as Shipton et al (2006) find that where HRM mechanisms are designed to promote exploratory learning, organisations are better able to support innovation. Similarly, and looking specifically at the SME context, Messersmith and Wales (2013) suggest that investing to improve stocks of human capital has a significant impact on the performance of young, growing firms. In summary, the literature base suggests a connection between HRD activity and positive organisational outcomes for SMEs, which includes enhanced innovation. Having said this, the focus on innovation (rather than creativity), as well as the dominance of positivist or neo-positivist methodologies in the literature base (see, for example, Cirella et al, 2016; Messersmith & Wales, 2013; Shipton et al, 2013), arguably leads us to a situation where we understand much less about the influence of HRD upon creativity, and in particular how HRD operates to affect creativity in SME settings. Given that creativity is a precursor to innovation (McLean, 2005), and the pressures smaller organisations face to innovate (Hotho & Champion, 2011; Vinck, 2014), this is a problematic state of affairs, and an area of theory into which this study will contribute.

Self-Directed Learning

Within the HRD field we know that there are trends toward the increased use of self-guided learning (Kraiger, 2014), and indeed that the strong internal focus within many SMEs supports self-direction in these contexts (Kidwell et al, 2018; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012).

Drawing from developments such as the demand for continuous learning and customised, 'just in time' formats (Durr, Guglielmino, & Guglielmino, 1996), Karakas and Manisaligil (2012) argue that success within HRD is increasingly related to the extent to which organisations enable employees to be effective self-directed learners. Given that HRD within SME settings is typically reactive (Saunders et al, 2014), and targeted at the resolution of immediate problems (Hoque & Bacon, 2006), it is interesting to consider how self-directed learning might operate in these settings.

One of the earliest definitions of SDL was offered by Knowles (1975: 18), who argued that it was:

> *"a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes."*

Others similarly note that SDL requires learners to take the initiative throughout the learning process (Brookfield, 2009, Ellinger, 2004; Hashim, 2008). Having said this, Ellinger (2004) differentiates SDL from informal/incidental learning, arguing that SDL is both planned and involves conscious consideration. In a similar vein, Hiemstra (1999) and Silén and Uhlin (2008) argue that SDL rests upon a transfer of ownership within learning from managers to employees. Intriguingly, whilst both Guglielmino and Guglielmino (2001) and Cho (2002) argue that learning in organisations is increasingly driven through learner-centred approaches, Park and Kwon (2004) submit that we must not assume that engaging with SDL is a solitary pursuit whereby the individual becomes isolated from their context. Drawing from Candy (1991), they too suggest that SDL concerns management of the learning process

passing from the organisation to the individual, but this comes with a caveat from Cho and Kwon (2005) who argue that social, cultural and/or political concerns will impact the control that any individual may exercise over their learning. Indeed, part of the popularity of SDL may lie in its congruence with employee empowerment and involvement (Durr et al, 1996). A broad consensus nonetheless forms around the notion that SDL is primarily based on the devolution of responsibility for learning, with organisations enabling employees to be key decision makers within the learning process.

Devolution of responsibility within the learning process arguably brings significant benefits to organisations (Ellinger, 2004). In particular, studies point toward individuals displaying a higher state of 'readiness' for SDL demonstrating improved job performance (Park & Kwon, 2004). Separately, Rana, Ardichvili, and Polesello's (2016) review notes various benefits accruing from SDL which are as diverse as cost effectiveness, the relevance and meaningfulness of learning, and the contributions that SDL makes to organisational knowledge bases, similar to the findings reached by Guglielmino and Guglielmino (2001). Despite the noted benefits, SDL requires that employees are motivated learners (Joo, Park, & Oh, 2013), are able to interact with others (Cho, 2002), and willing to take initiative in scoping out, engaging in, and evaluating learning; assumptions which may not hold true for all types of employees. Having said this, others also find positive benefits accruing through SDL including cost savings, increases in capacity for critical thinking, and advances in both knowledge sharing and network building respectively (Karakas & Manisaligil, 2012). This indicates that in spite of potential difficulties in relation to the motivation of individuals to learn, engagement with SDL can provide significant advantages for organisations. In linking directly to creativity, Mitlacher et al (2005) argues that there is a connection between SDL and performance in creative roles, while Guglielmino et al (1987) similarly found that

individuals with a higher 'readiness' for SDL also performed better in jobs requiring a high level of creativity.   The benefits accruing to organisations through SDL are therefore potentially significant.   It may be posited that the learner-led nature of SDL positively facilitates the development of ideas because it assists in embedding an exploratory learning focus (Shipton et al, 2006) within organisations.   Encouraging SDL could therefore be one way in which organisations may develop creative capacity.

Despite the informative nature of the literature discussed above, much less is known about the operationalisation of SDL, particularly in smaller firms.   Rana et al (2016) do argue that participatory practices and employee empowerment are important for SDL to take root, suggesting that a culture of employee involvement (Marchington, 2015) is an enabler of SDL. It is also thought that self-awareness and the ability to critically reflect upon one's own knowledge and skills (Tseng, 2013), together with the ability to act autonomously (Ellinger, 2004) are important to SDL.   Similarly, Park and Kwon (2004) submit that employees must have basic learning competences and a desire to commit to lifelong learning, before SDL can produce organisationally important outcomes.   Separately, Guglielmino et al (1987) argue that 'readiness' for SDL differs according to variables including gender, educational level, individual creativity, and problem solving ability.   Similar factors are also noted by Raemdonck, van der Leeden, Valcke, Segers, and Thijssen (2012), with Clardy (2000) independently highlighting a range of variables including levels of mental ability, achievement motivation, and curiosity.   Smith, Sadler-Smith, Robertson, and Wakefield (2007) offer a different perspective by suggesting that organisations need 'learning leaders', pointing toward the role of organisational leaders in embedding a culture that prizes engagement with learning activity.   Confessore and Kops (1998) arrive at similar conclusions regarding the need for supportive contexts, tolerance of error, and participative management

styles, with 'collaboration' also being highlighted as important by other scholars (Karakas & Manisaligil, 2012).

Despite coverage of a range of issues including leaders and leadership styles (Confessore & Kops, 1998; Smith et al, 2007), employee characteristics and competences (Ellinger, 2004; Guglielmino et al, 1987; Park & Kwon, 2004; Raemdonck et al, 2012; Tseng, 2013), together with employee participation, empowerment and involvement as drivers of SDL (Karakas & Manisaligil, 2012; Rana et al, 2016; Smith et al, 2007), existing studies are arguably somewhat idealistic. Studies assume significant organisational resource investment in learning activity (Park & Kwon, 2004; Rana et al, 2016), and presume comfort with risk taking (Confessore & Kops, 1998; Park & Kwon, 2004). We know much less from existing studies about the operation of SDL in resource constrained contexts such as those that SMEs typically operate within (Hessels & Parker, 2013; Woschke et al, 2017). This is despite knowledge that the strong internal focus in these contexts can be supportive of self-direction (Kidwell et al, 2018; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012). Coupled with this, while studies hint at a positive connection between SDL and creativity (Guglielmino et al, 1987; Mitlacher et al, 2005), we know little about the nature and scope of this relationship. It is therefore pertinent to inquire into the relationship between SDL and the creative process, exploring how SMEs may balance the competing demands of obtaining value from their limited resources whilst permitting employees the freedom to self-direct learning activity. This paper therefore takes forward the following research questions:

(1) To what extent does self-directedness within learning activity support the generation of ideas in SME contexts, and (2) how may SMEs facilitate SDL in resource-poor environments?

Methods

Idea generation, as discussed in this paper, is an intangible phenomenon, linked to people rather than processes (Egan, 2005; Gupta & Singal, 1993; Shalley 1991). Ideas require individuals, working individually or in groups, to bring them into existence; they are therefore the very epitome of social construction (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). As a result, investigating the given research questions requires an interpretivist philosophy, gathering and analysing data through a qualitative, inductive approach (Creswell, 2007; Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010); a strategy utilised by other scholars pursuing similar lines of inquiry (Cope, 2011; Kempster & Cope, 2010).

Given the need to access a wide ranging sample of SMEs, this study took place in South West England, a region which has strong traditions and reliance on the presence and growth of such organisations (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2017), yet is under-researched as an empirical context. In targeting 'exploration' within this study it was logical to collect data from an empirical context in which SMEs are ubiquitous in nature. Cognisant of the difficulties associated with the collection of data from SMEs (Alcadipani & Hodgson, 2009; Altinay & Wang, 2009), this study utilised a purposive approach to sampling (Patton, 1990). The researcher developed connections with the business community through attendance at events and meetings held by networking groups and chambers of commerce, connecting with a variety of organisations of differing sizes in differing sectors in a search for revelatory (Yin, 2013) settings. Incorporating diversity within the sample was advantageous in the search for breakdowns in understanding (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011), and therefore facilitated the process of theorisation. Findings from this study can nonetheless usefully inform future debate because the UK shares a national business system and culture (Whitley,

2009). Contextual information regarding each participating organisation is available in table 1, together with details regarding the number of interviews undertaken within each.

Insert table 1 about here

As SMEs have limited time and capacity to engage with academic research, the semi-structured interview (Alvesson, 2011) was indicated as the optimal method of data collection, facilitating timely exploration of the questions under investigation. This approach encouraged exploration, enabling informants to steer the interview toward topics that were of importance to them, although the use of an interview 'guide' ensured that there was a degree of comparability between conversations (Alvesson, 2011; Creswell, 2007). As this specific inquiry was part of a broader investigation into the factors that impacted the creative process within SMEs, the guide contained numerous questions on a range of topics including the extent to which the organisation generated ideas, how the work environment impacted ideation, control, relationships and social interactions, reactions to error, the storing and sharing of ideas and finally, recognition of ideas.

Questions of particular relevance to this inquiry were primarily contained under the second of the stated areas; how the work environment impacted ideation, where interviewees were asked about managerial practices and their impact upon idea generation, extending to approaches to human resource management and learning. Questions were asked in language suitable for a non-specialist audience, were open in nature, and were piloted in two organisations known to the researcher prior to the start of data collection. This pilot test assessed the relevance of the interview protocol across a selection of individuals from senior managers to administrative/manual employees. Minor changes were made to the language

used in the interview guide following the pilot test, specifically to remove remaining jargon, but the question areas remained unaltered. One of these changes was simply to replace the term 'idea generation' within one question with the phrase '…generates ideas'. Examples of the finalised questions in the interview guide included; "Can you describe your organisation's approach to learning?" and "Can you describe a time when you felt most able to generate ideas at work?" Follow up questions were used in situations where it was necessary to probe deeper into informant responses. These questions investigated the impact of an event, situation or reaction on the interviewee's desire to generate ideas, or enquired as to the context within which the event, situation or reaction occurred.

In total, 57 individuals participated in interviews for this study, with the data set containing contributions from senior managers, professional employees, administrative and manual workers, as well as middle and junior managers where those hierarchical levels were present in the participating organisations. In some of the smaller settings all organisational members were interviewed, but at other times there was an element of convenience regarding the sample. For instance, some employees may have been on holiday or engaged in off-site meetings at the time of data collection, and were therefore unable to participate in an interview. In larger settings the researcher sought volunteers for interview. An organisational gatekeeper forwarded an email to all staff on behalf of the researcher. Employees replied directly to the researcher, and mutually convenient arrangements for the interview were subsequently made.

A sizeable dataset was needed to capture a variety of perspectives on HR and HRD practice from heterogeneous groups, and saturation began to occur once the researcher passed forty interviews (Saunders & Townsend, 2016). The sampling approach adopted helped to

overcome the problematic 'intended-implemented' gap within HRM-related research (Lengnick-Hall et al, 2009; Piening, Baluch, & Ridder, 2014). The intention was to create a dataset that cut through organisational hierarchies in order to explore a variety of perspectives, searching for interesting observations and potential breakdowns (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011) in understanding. Interview conversations were fully recorded and transcribed, and varied from a minimum of 30 minutes to a maximum exceeding 90 minutes. They were all conducted in person by the researcher, at each organisation's main operating location, and were concluded by the end of December 2012. Ethical approval was sought from the researcher's institution in advance of data collection. All participants were briefed about the study, signing consent forms prior to the start of interviews. These forms explained the purpose of the study, how data would be handled, and contained the researcher's contact details if the participant subsequently wished to withdraw their contribution. All transcripts were fully anonymised and participants were informed that results would be presented in such a way that no contribution could be linked back to any individual. This guarantee of anonymity appeared to encourage the overwhelming majority of participants to be frank and open during interview conversations, with individuals being surprisingly candid with their contributions. On occasion some individuals appeared more guarded, but this was only found in a small minority of cases.

Thematic analysis was utilised to identify and report patterns within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). This method was chosen because it can work "both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of reality" (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 81), facilitating theorisation as a result. Data analysis proceeded through a number of different stages including familiarisation, the generation of initial codes, a search for unifying themes, a review of themes, the definition and naming of themes, and a final

reporting of these themes through the production of this paper. Beginning the process, reading and re-reading of transcripts facilitated familiarisation with the data, with first-order coding undertaken in a predominantly inductive fashion. During the initial coding process the researcher had an objective in mind to uncover facilitators and inhibitors of idea generation, but did not seek to explicitly superimpose themes from extant literature onto the data. The researcher did, however, have a breadth of awareness regarding literature connected to creativity and innovation and so it would be incorrect to claim that a purely inductive coding strategy was utilised. The entire dataset of 57 interviews was coded during the first pass. Repetitive concepts emerged almost immediately during this process, although new codes continued to emerge during the first coding pass.

Following the initial coding pass, a total of 85 distinct codes were counted. A period of reflection upon the contents of the dataset then followed, during which broad ideas about the contents of the data (Morse & Richards, 2002) were developed, and the researcher sought to rationalise the analysis structure by eliminating redundant codes. This was facilitated by further reading and re-reading of the transcripts until a point was reached whereby the emerging coding structure was deemed, by the researcher, to properly explain the data. During this process a total of 24 initial codes were discarded leaving a total of 61 distinct codes. For instance, 'ability to take risks', 'risky decisions', and 'managerial attitude to risk' were all rationalised under the code 'risk-taking'. Table 2 provides examples of the first-order codes generated and demonstrates linkages to the second-order unifying themes. As noted previously, this specific inquiry was part of a broader investigation and so therefore only the parts of the coding structure relevant to this paper are included in table 2.

Insert table 2 about here

Themes were developed through an iterative process. Borrowing ideas from Attride-Stirling (2001), a thematic network was used to organise the first-order codes. The researcher utilised a data driven approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to the organisation of codes, and sought to understand whether, and how, elements of the coding structure linked together (Powell et al, 2017). Once connections were isolated, the broader categories were named to produce the themes explored within this paper. These 'names', as indicated in table 2, were developed by the researcher through a predominantly inductive process. It would again, however, be erroneous to claim that prior studies/literature had no influence, as the researcher had awareness of the wider literature base. Whilst developing the thematic network certain first-order codes were found to be only marginally relevant or, upon further investigation, contained only in isolated transcripts. Where such issues occurred, the codes were excluded from the analysis process if the underlying data were ambiguous, or an account was clearly based on faulty assumptions. Ultimately the coding process resulted in the emergence, and then the naming/definition of the three themes depicted in table 2. Themes were validated by comparing them against the broader dataset, specifically seeking to ascertain whether they explained differences between organisations believed (by participants) to generate many ideas, against those where idea generation was believed to be poor, or alternatively, absent. The forthcoming findings and discussions set out and elaborate upon the evidence supporting the highlighted themes, with quotations used to add 'voice' to the text (Jack & Anderson, 2002). QSR NVivo was used to assist the data handling and analysis process.

Findings

This section of the paper presents the findings of this study in relation to the extent to which SDL supports idea generation in SMEs, and how SMEs may facilitate SDL in resource-poor environments.

Boosting idea generation through employee self-direction in learning

Across the dataset it became clear that whilst SMEs faced significant resource issues which impacted their approaches to human resource development activities, organisations believed (by participants) to generate many new ideas were supportive of learning activities, including the ability of employees to self-direct their personal development. A response from a manager at organisation H was typical of the opinions expressed within creative settings:

"Training and learning is a difficult one [i.e. subject]. I can't commit the money that I'd like but I facilitate as best I can. There are times when the answer is "no"… or not no, but how can we find a way to do that together. Others [i.e. employees] have to lead in exploring, or I don't know… scouting things out for us. That's when fascinating directions and ideas emerge, but I can't lead that."

Senior Manager, Organisation H

Linking to the first-order codes of 'resource constraints', 'exploration', and 'employee driven', this participant clearly demonstrated that whilst learning activity was considered important, it can be "*difficult*" to facilitate in a resource-poor environment. The quotation suggests, however, that the individual was supportive of learning activity and provides hints that the organisation supported an element of self-directed learning; "*how can we find a way to do that together (…) others have to lead in exploring*". This provides the beginnings of an

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answer to the first research question, highlighting a linkage to idea generation by suggesting self-directed exploration produced "*fascinating directions and ideas*". This finding was indicative of the organisation's broader culture which was very collaborative and participative, but similar views were discovered within organisation A, a much larger SME, where it was argued; "*I have a lot of say when it comes to learning (…) how can you be creative if the organisation shuts you [i.e. your learning opportunities] down?*" (Professional Employee, Organisation A). These findings again are informative in addressing the first research question posed by this study. Similarly within organisation B it was pointed out that:

"*We are driven by circumstance, what we can afford to invest in development changes almost every quarter depending on business activity, so [it is] a constant monitoring and planning exercise. (…) But it's [investment in learning] not driven by me, or the broader management team… I think if you want creative ideas employees must have some ownership, they have to drive the learning process because they are the specialists, they know their area far better than we can.*"

Senior Manager, Organisation B

Reflective of the first-order codes 'opportunistic', 'resources', and 'short-term planning', this evidence is arguably powerful in demonstrating how learning is viewed within the SMEs identifying themselves as producing many ideas. Similar to the view expressed at organisation H, there are strong considerations of resource constraints, but at the same time there was a view that if learning activity is to support creative ideas, then an element of self-direction is essential; "*employees must have some ownership*", although the use of the qualifying term "*some*" nuances the emerging answer to research question one by hinting that control of learning does not pass fully to employees. Similar links between idea generation

and self-directed learning were found in other elements of the sample, shown by the view at organisation A that, "*if you desire ideas then there has to be an element of free reign with regards to developmental directions and activities*" (Middle Manager). Where participants, however, felt that their organisations were not effective at producing new ideas, different perspectives emerged:

"*This is a small organisation - we can't let employees run wild. We are limited on funding so that requires us to be… to think very carefully about where that is allocated… and the consequences of those decisions. (…) That [learning investment] is decided by me, together with the heads of our teams, yes – we listen [to the views of others], but we make the call.*"

Senior Manager, Organisation E

Compared to previous evidence, it is clear that whilst this organisation faces similar resource constraints, those in leadership positions appear to retain very much more authority in deciding where resources are committed. The participant suggests that they "*listen*", but there are potentially significant differences between 'listening' and the situations described at organisations A, B, and H. At the latter organisations (A, B, and H) evidence points to the devolution of decision making from managers to employees, with managers recognising that employees are better placed to make decisions because they have specialist knowledge, and a significant depth of experience in their respective fields.

Operationalising self-directedness in learning: Participative dialogue

In addressing the second research question, this study isolates a facilitative mechanism supporting self-directed learning activity within SMEs, named 'participative dialogue'. This term has been chosen as it reflects a consensus emerging from SMEs believed to produce

many ideas regarding the inclusion of both managerial and employee 'voices' in shaping the context for learning and development. Where organisations were successful in producing many new ideas evidence points to both employers and employees contributing to, and collectively framing, the 'space' for learning. Responses from such settings were typified by the following:

"...it [development] is a continual dialogue around how stuff is going (...) It's not [that] you set out on a journey and it is a linear project, it goes from point A to point B, if it needs to move, it needs to move and I genuinely believe I have as much say in that, probably more, than my director... It is... maybe you know where the end game is or whatever, and you know that you need to make sure it is that or you might end up going up here (gestures) and then you need to go [i.e. talk to manager/director] "actually, we are going to end up over here, is that ok?""

Professional employee, organisation D

The finding above emerged from a conversation concerning the exploitation of learning opportunities and links to the first-order codes 'continuous conversations', 'non-linear', 'co-determination, and 'discussion'. Typical of other respondents from organisation D, this individual intimated that they had significant freedom in pursuing developmental avenues, but very interestingly brought forward the notion of a continuous conversation around learning activity. For this individual it was important to involve others, in this case her direct manager, in conversations about learning, with such exchanges being conceptualised as "*a continual dialogue*". Such conceptualisations were very different to the views within less creative organisations such as C and G, where participants suggested that learning was "*dictated by management*" (Administrative Employee, Organisation C), or "*I can have an*

opinion about training, but it's ignored" (Manual Employee, Organisation G). Returning to the finding from organisation D, it is important to note that the culture of this organisation was very collaborative and open to new ideas. This therefore opens the question as to how specific or general the findings related to the theme of 'participative dialogue' may be. Importantly, data from differing, creative organisations, points to very similar mechanisms being in operation:

"For example, [employee] might be developing a piece of [computer] code and he's spending half an hour doing this part… [fellow senior manager] knows that he can walk in there and say "right, if you do this… you can do it in 30 seconds." He is reluctant to do that because he wants [employee] to kind of learn by mistakes and learn his own way and so what we've arrived at… we spoke about this as a team, and the team view was that we don't want to spend kind of two hours trying to sort something [i.e. work problems] out; hang in there for as long as it's reasonable, say half an hour and then put your hand up and ask. Because [fellow senior manager] has got lots of answers but we need these people to grow on their own."

Senior manager, organisation I

Similar to organisation D, there is evidence at organisation I of dialogue concerning the learning process, with the above evidence connecting with 'co-determination' and 'objective setting' as first-order codes. The organisation opens up space for self-directedness within learning, but proactively, and in this case significantly so, manages the resulting space in order to make best use of organisational resources (in this case employee time). The senior manager makes specific reference to "*learn[ing] by mistakes*" with employees "*grow[ing] on their own*" and "*learn[ing] his (sic) own way*", but that there is also an element of

"*reasonable[ness]*" that requires consideration. From the quotation it can be argued that self-directedness within learning is present at this organisation, but subject to greater managerial scrutiny, potentially due to the employees being significantly less experienced than the two individuals in senior management positions. Managers within the organisation were keen to support individuals developing their own way of approaching problems and finding their own routes to success, arguing that this was "*what keeps us different and gives us uniqueness*" (Senior manager, organisation I). Including a variety of voices in the development conversation was argued to facilitate self-directedness in learning, whilst ensuring that the organisation was making effective use of its limited resources.

Whilst arguing that 'participative dialogue' is an important facilitative mechanism supporting self-directedness within SME contexts, where such dialogue was perceived as overt managerial 'guidance' or 'control', this study found that it could negatively impact learning activity and could also operate to constrain the generation of ideas. To illustrate this, the following two quotations from organisation J, believed by participants to be relatively poor at generating ideas, highlight opposing views of an exchange regarding career and development discussions and the impact of that exchange on idea generation:

"*So my job is to broaden out the perspective and set the context. If you just give people a very open, blank sheet I don't think it's always that helpful to them. That can almost just freeze people which is quite interesting (…) because I think people within a business want the environment to have certain parameters set in which they then feel secure and once that security is in place then they feel that they can start exploring things a little bit more.*"

Senior manager, organisation J

"…but then [Senior Manager] pulled out a page that he had already prepared with his ideas and said "this is what I am thinking, this is where I want [us] to go…" and then I felt that kind of stunted the conversation because then immediately both me and [fellow employee] were like "oh right, ok, so this is our focus", so we can't just come up with something completely different?"

Professional employee, organisation J

It is clear that the intent from the senior manager was to be helpful in terms of providing a frame for 'discussion', but it is also apparent from the second quotation that the employee considered that the framing "*stunted the conversation*" and constrained idea generation, therefore linking with the first-order codes 'stunted' and 'one-directional'. Unlike at organisations C and G, we can argue that the manager within organisation J was attempting to open up dialogue, rather than dictate a path or ignore employee input. The immediate question is therefore why opening up a dialogue was felt, by participants, to constrain self-directedness at organisation J, while it was a positive influence at both organisations D and, more so, I. Initially we could argue that differing employee skill sets and work practices may explain these different reactions, although in all situations (organisations D, I, and J) employees can be classified as 'skilled professionals', and therefore such differences are unlikely to be the root cause of the observed divergence. A more plausible explanation could be that employees at organisations D and I were involved in the framing process itself; "*we spoke about this as a team, and the team view was*", whereas at organisation J the framing was completed by the senior manager at the outset; "*I think people within a business want the environment to have certain parameters set*". We may therefore postulate that the transfer of control over learning rests in a liminal, negotiated space between organisation and employee.

Findings point to this liminal space being in a state of flux where employees and managers continually revise and revisit their positioning vis a vis each other.

Learning how to learn: Critical self-appraisal

Connected with research question two, this study isolates a further factor which is important in operationalising self-directedness within SME contexts; critical self-appraisal. The study found that the ability to critically reflect on one's existing knowledge/skills/abilities, independently identifying development pathways, was important in driving the generation of ideas through self-directed approaches to learning. Typical of the data captured within organisations identified through the data collection as more creative, the respondent below considers the role of the employee in identifying learning needs, relating that to exploratory thinking:

"Before you let them [employees] go I think there is another stage before that. It's about… well really it's about fundamental things really like helping people to recognise areas of deficit on their own and then to think logically about relevant actions. I guess it is a sort of self-assessment mentality that we encourage, particularly with new members [of staff]. Being more self-critical is an important first stage which unlocks all that newness [meaning new ideas], something that staff new to us often lack."

Senior Manager, Organisation B

Intriguingly, the participant argues for a "*self-assessment mentality*", suggesting that before self-directedness could take root there was a need for the organisation to enable its employees to reflect. Linking to first-order codes 'learning to learn', 'probing/questioning', and 'growth', the evidence points to a self-critical mind-set where individuals actively "*recognise*

areas of deficit", which positively feeds into employee 'readiness' for self-directedness. Several interviewees made clear that at Organisation B efforts were made to work with new joiners in order to socialise them into key patterns of working and thinking, such as "*being more self-aware*" (Professional Employee, Organisation B). This was argued, by interviewees themselves, to prepare individuals to become self-directed learners, subsequently thought to support idea generation because it "*unlocks all that newness*". Similar experiences were uncovered at organisation H:

"I've become more aware as I've got more experience. I think you tend to recognise issues a bit more quickly, when I started in my career I was more naïve in that sense. I obviously wanted to move my skills, knowledge… whatever… forward, but I didn't lead it. I expected that my manager, the HR consultant perhaps, would identify things, arrange courses (…) the unexpected connections are made when I work through problems myself and that's valuable for creativity, you know… go off and investigate something, learn something, like a piece of software, go to a workshop off my own back. That's where the new thinking and ideas come from."

<div align="right">Professional Employee, Organisation H</div>

What marks this data out as being particularly informative is the view that 'learning how to learn', in particular the ability to self-appraise, is an ongoing process that develops over time; therefore linking with first-order codes 'learning to learn', 'level of experience', and 'growth'. The informant specifically notes that they became more proficient at driving their own development as they gathered more experience and, importantly, that the process of self-appraisal and self-diagnosis of areas for learning had a positive impact on creativity; "*the unexpected connections are made when I work through problems myself and that's valuable*

for creativity". What can therefore be inferred is that idea generation is supported through self-directed learning, in part, because employee self-appraisal produces "*unexpected connections*" which contribute to the emergence of divergent patterns of thinking. In organisations believed to struggle to develop new ideas, such as organisations C, E, and F, a very different picture emerged:

"*Our problem is that people aren't here to learn… The jobs are static, for the most part things don't change… so it's passive, I mean people like [employee] and [employee], they've been here for years and years and they just are not interested.*"

Senior Manager, Organisation F

Intriguingly the evidence from organisation F suggests that both individual and organisation level issues impact upon learning. "Interest" from the employees was believed to be lacking in this setting, which contrasts significantly with the views discovered within more creative settings such as organisations B and H. Alongside this, job roles were described as "*static*", although the interviewee did suggest that a lack of learning is problematic nonetheless. Similar views were discovered within other settings described as less creative, including at organisation C, where employees were argued to be "*unable or unwilling*" (Middle Manager) to participate in learning, with employees suggesting that it "*isn't my job [to learn]*" (Manual Employee). Organisation C has a particularly long history and has existed in its present form for a significant period of time. One could therefore posit that a lack of change in work and working methods has potentially contributed to a situation in which employees do not see value in engaging with learning.

Building from the above, particularly contributions from organisation B, evidence collected by this study also points to leaders/managers in SME contexts holding an important role in facilitating critical self-appraisal, with many interviewees discussing aspects of 'leadership' or 'leadership/management styles'. Typical of such exchanges, the following quotation was part of a wider discussion concerning the way in which the informant reflected upon their learning needs and identified developmental directions;

"I am given a lot of autonomy, a lot of trust, a lot of respect but I am challenged appropriately. That challenge comes in a way that makes me think rather than makes me panic and go "oh my god, I'm not doing this properly." It is just questioning sort of "why are you doing that?" and that kind of thing which really makes me think a bit more deeply about things and question things and maybe change things a little bit. (…) We learn from each other."

Middle Manager, Organisation D

Consistent with discussions connected with the previous theme of 'participative dialogue', the extract demonstrates that whilst the manager provides the informant with freedom to explore, challenge is nevertheless evident. 'Challenge' provokes reflection on the part of the employee, subsequently altering the direction of development/learning pursued by the employee. First-order codes such as 'non-directive (manager), 'two-way learning' and 'challenging' were therefore attached to this vignette. The interviewee noted that the manager did not actively promote a specific alternative course of action, instead it was argued that questioning from the manager prompted reflection, with the relationship symbiotic as evidenced by the final phrase; "*we learn from each other*". This evidence arguably provides further support for the view that improved outcomes are reached where multiple voices are

present in the learning conversation. A question that must, therefore, be addressed within the forthcoming discussion, concerns whether the evidence presented by this paper is consistent with conceptualisations of *'self'* directed learning.

Discussion

This section explores the extent to which SDL links to idea generation in SMEs, discussing the operationalisation of the concept in these environments. In order to ensure the 'voice' of participants (Jack & Anderson, 2002) in this discussion, some expressions are used that are drawn from the data-set. These are used for illustrative purposes but are not directly referenced to the individual source in order to maintain the flow of the argument.

Where organisations were believed, by participants, to generate many ideas, expressions or narrations of learning activity contained strong indicators that employees had significant involvement in driving the learning process; "*others [i.e. employees] have to lead*", "*employees must have ownership*", "*there has to be an element of free reign*". In such settings participants argued that self-directed approaches to learning linked strongly to idea generation; "*that's when fascinating directions and ideas emerge*", "*how can you be creative if the organisation shuts you down?*". While not widely generalisable due to the methodological approach adopted, this study answers research question one and extends previous work (Guglielmino et al, 1987; Mitlacher et al, 2005), by providing empirical evidence concerning the link between self-directed learning activity and idea generation in SME contexts. Part of the reason explaining the connection between SDL and idea generation is that employees can engage in reactive learning (Saunders et al, 2014), taking advantage of opportunities as they present themselves, with informality (Gray, 2006; Tam & Gray, 2016a) within learning therefore being an asset for the small firm because it positively

contributes to the generation of ideas. The key theoretical contribution arrived at by this study, however, arises from research question two. In considering how SMEs may facilitate self-directedness in resource-poor environments, the contribution made by this study links to the second and third themes discussed in the findings section, and is built around three facets: (1) shared ownership of the learning process, (2) the inclusion of multiple voices in the conversations shaping learning, and (3) the role of employee critical self-appraisal.

SDL is founded upon a transfer of ownership within the learning process from employer to employee (Hiemstra 1999; Silén & Uhlin, 2008) and significant employee initiative in learning (Brookfield, 2009; Confessore & Kops, 1998; Knowles, 1975); otherwise learning cannot be considered to be self-directed. Results from this study, however, suggest that whilst there is a strong element of employee input into learning processes within SMEs generating many ideas, any transfer of ownership cannot be considered to be complete. Evident within organisations successfully producing many ideas were strong tendencies toward a *shared* ownership of learning, for example at organisation I consideration was given to the "*team view*", and at organisation D there was "*a continual dialogue*" surrounding learning. Tensions were however apparent in the findings, for example at organisation J, which points to ownership over learning existing in a liminal space (for an overview of liminality as a concept please refer to Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016: 48-49) between the organisation and its employees. Because the control of learning cannot be considered to fully pass from organisation to employee, learning arguably exists in somewhat of a state of flux, with a continued negotiation needed between SMEs and their employees; "*it is a continual dialogue*".

The points discussed above place us in somewhat of a quandary. Yes, there is evidence that SMEs are attempting to realise the benefits that accrue through SDL (Ellinger, 2004; Hashim, 2008; Karakas & Manisaligil, 2012; Park & Kwon, 2004; Rana et al, 2016), and there is evidence to suggest that where idea generation is strong, managers permit elements of self-directedness. But, the data also suggests that managers within SMEs retain oversight through preserving their own involvement in the learning conversation. Due to the involvement and influence retained by managers, SDL may therefore be an erroneous term to utilise when seeking to explain the findings from this study. It can be argued that this study points to learning within SME contexts being *co-directed* (termed CDL), rather than being genuinely self-directed. Building from the definition of SDL offered by Knowles (1975), the following definition of CDL is offered. CDL is 'a process in which there is shared responsibility between managers and employees for the learning process, encompassing the setting of a learning strategy, diagnosis of learning needs and objectives, identification of learning opportunities and the planning of learning, through to the evaluation of learning outcomes'.

CDL, as a concept, better reflects the finding that multiple stakeholders have a presence in the learning process. It is therefore an important contribution to the literature discussing HRD in smaller organisational contexts (Nolan & Garavan, 2016), as well as literature that links learning to creativity and innovation in SME settings (for example, Le, 2015; McLean, 2005; Saunders et al, 2014). Engaging in CDL may be construed as a response to the resource pressures facing SMEs (Hessels & Parker, 2013; Woschke et al, 2017), and a product of the strong internal focus in smaller firms (Kidwell et al, 2018; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012). It arguably provides a supporting structure (Confessore & Kops, 1998) within which SMEs can extract some of the benefits which we know are accrued through self-directedness, whilst at the same time making efficient use of their limited resources. In

considering how the proposed co-direction of learning may enhance idea generation, the organisational learning literature offers a potentially intriguing explanation. Engaging in CDL may assist in embedding enabling structures which facilitate independent knowledge search and construction (Pedler, et al, 1997; Senge, 1990), where employees can be active information gatherers for SMEs, partly because they can engage in opportunistic learning (Saunders et al, 2014). Thus, different and diverse experiences are brought back into the SME and aggregated at an organisational level, positively contributing to the divergence (Penaluna et al, 2010) that idea generation depends upon. Whilst an intriguing notion, how SMEs may balance elements of self-directedness within learning whilst maintaining their ability to control/guide the learning process is an area that is ripe for future research inquiry.

In beginning to contribute an answer to the question posed above, this study isolates a mechanism termed 'participative dialogue'. Of particular interest is not that 'collaboration' (Karakas & Manisaligil, 2012) exists within the SME, nor that SMEs may be utilising participative management styles (Confessore & Kops, 1998), but what is seen in the SMEs generating many ideas is significant employee involvement and participation in scoping activities: "W*e spoke about this as a team, and the team view was…*", "*if it needs to move, it needs to move and I genuinely believe I have as much say in that, probably more, than my director*". Where idea generation was less successful, for instance at organisation J, managers set "*parameters*" in advance; the argument therefore being that multiple voices are needed at the initial parameter setting / scoping stage. What can therefore be argued is that in order for some of the benefits associated with self-directedness to be accrued through a co-direction of learning, there must be a legitimation of employee voice within the SME, rather than voice being perceived as a threat (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). Entrepreneurs and owner/managers must be willing to cede a certain amount of control over areas of

learning; having influence within the process but, akin a conductor, enabling employees to have powerful voices in this conversation (Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 2001). Where organisations did not permit such co-creation, for example at organisations C, G, and J, benefits associated with self-directedness, (for example, idea generation, as studied within this paper), were not evident.

A final contribution arrived at by this study concerns the competences or personal attributes (Clardy, 2000; Ellinger, 2004; Raemdonck et al, 2012) that facilitate self-directedness in an SME context. This is not, however, to argue that this study provides a full list of competences, indeed it does not seek to do so. Evidence collected by this study, however, does point to the ability to self-diagnose learning needs through critical self-appraisal as being an important competence in supporting self-directedness; "*it is a sort of self-appraisal mentality*", "*the unexpected connections are made when I work through problems myself*". Interestingly interviewees made direct connections between their ability to critically self-appraise and their ability to generate ideas; "*that's where the new thinking and best ideas come from*". This directly contrasts the evidence collected from organisations producing fewer ideas, where individuals were said to be "*unable or unwilling*" to participate in learning. We may argue that the ability to critically self-appraise contributes to the surfacing of unexpected patterns of divergent thinking (Penaluna et al, 2010), which enables the generation of different ideas. In supporting the argument that learning within the SME is co- rather than self-directed, evidence also suggests that the 'support' provided by leaders/managers (Confessore & Kops, 1998; Smith et al, 2007) takes the form of provocation. Provocation, while not necessarily directing individuals toward a particular course of action, is argued to encourage reflective thought; "*that kind of thing makes me think a bit more deeply about things and question things and maybe change things a little bit*", and

again highlights the benefits accrued through including multiple voices in the conversations that shape learning.

Drawing this discussion to a focal point requires consideration regarding linkages between the various themes in order to explain how the proposed concept of CDL operates in an SME context. The first step to embedding CDL would appear to be the development of shared ownership of learning, via the legitimation of employee voice. Following the establishment of shared ownership it is arguably then that SMEs can encourage participative dialogue related to learning. Logical reasoning would indicate that the reverse relationship – i.e. participative dialogue occurring before the establishment of shared ownership, would be unlikely. Critical self-appraisal, as an employee competence necessary for CDL, would appear to stand alongside rather than in direct sequence with the other factors. Participants indicated that critical self-appraisal developed over time, and it can therefore be posited that an interaction exists between an environment built on shared ownership, and employee ability to critically self-appraise. Employee participation in learning may facilitate the development of self-appraisal as it encourages reflection and introspective thought, rather than a reliance on managerial instruction and intervention.

Contribution and Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the theory base regarding HRD in SME settings (Nolan & Garavan, 2016). It finds support for the view that an element of self-directedness within learning (Knowles, 1975; Park & Kwon, 2004) links to idea generation within SME environments, but argues that the learning that supports idea generation should be conceptualised as co- rather than self-directed. It finds that whilst there may be strong employee input into learning processes within SMEs generating many ideas, the inclusion of multiple voices within such

conversations, via a mechanism isolated and named 'participative dialogue', suggests learning must be considered co- rather than self-directed. Co-directed approaches to learning arguably represent an attempt, on behalf of SMEs, to gather some of the benefits associated with self-directedness (Ellinger, 2004; Hashim, 2008; Karakas & Manisaligil, 2012; Park & Kwon, 2004; Rana et al, 2016), whilst enabling the navigation of resource constraints (Hessels & Parker, 2013; Woschke et al, 2017). Drawing on literature connected with organisational learning (Pedler et al, 1997; Senge, 1990), it is theorised that co-directed approaches to learning enhance idea generation because they enable employees to engage with independent knowledge search and construction. Such opportunistic learning (Saunders et al, 2014) positively contributes to the divergence (Penaluna et al, 2010) that idea generation depends upon, and thus supports the broader creative process.

In exploring how 'participative dialogue' may facilitate a co-direction of learning, this study builds on the work of Milliken et al (2003) by arguing that rather than perceiving employee voice as a potential threat, SMEs must legitimise employee voice in the conversations that shape learning. What we see through this study is that the transfer of ownership over learning (Confessore & Kops, 1998; Knowles, 1975) is not complete, but rather rests in a liminal space between organisation and employee. This is not to be confused with straightforward 'collaboration' (Karakas & Manisaligil, 2012), because this study finds that employee involvement in learning occurs at a strategic, parameter setting stage, not solely when operational or practical decisions regarding learning are made. Furthermore, building on the work of Park and Kwon (2004), Raemdonck et al (2012) and Tseng (2013) regarding competences required for self-directedness, evidence demonstrates that employee ability to critically self-appraise and identify learning needs positively contributes to readiness (Guglielmino et al, 1987) for self-directedness. Leaders/managers can support (Confessore &

Kops, 1998; Smith et al, 2007) such efforts by offering a provocative challenge, which facilitates divergent (Penaluna et al, 2010) thought.

Implications for Practitioners

A number of important practical implications flow from the findings and theoretical contributions arrived at by this study. Initially it can be argued that SMEs seeking to generate ideas must enable significant employee input within learning. Managers within these settings must arguably see employees as strategic partners within the learning process, encouraging involvement which extends significantly beyond 'collaboration' (Karakas & Manisaligil, 2012). The presence of numerous voices in the conversations that shape learning means that managers in SME settings must continually engage with key stakeholders, continually revising and revisiting their positioning with respect to other groups. The aim is not for managers to form strict guides around learning and involvement in learning, but to be responsive to changes in circumstances. This study also highlights the importance of employees developing a self-assessment mentality, surfacing new patterns of thinking through continual reflective and introspective conversations. Critical self-appraisal is argued to develop over time, with managers assisting in employee development by offering a provocative challenge. The aim here is for managers to offer challenge in such a way that it provokes employee reflection, encouraging self-reliance rather than employee dependence on managerial direction and instruction.

Limitations and Recommendations for Research

Despite useful theoretical and practical contributions emerging from this research, it is not without its limitations. Chief amongst these is that the qualitative, inductive methodology does not permit generalisation. Further research could usefully test the claims made by this

study in a broader range of contexts in order to ascertain the extent to which the findings are replicable. Indeed in order to understand the broader applicability of the theorisations developed within this paper it would be useful to ascertain whether, and if so how, the concepts operate in larger organisational settings. In deepening the contributions made by this present study, scholars should consider how the impact of the claimed 'co-direction' of learning upon idea generation may be measured (van Rooij & Merkebu, 2015). Importantly in this regard the application of longitudinal methodologies may be useful in tracking the impact of CDL upon the production, and subsequent development, of ideas. Longitudinal inquiry, potentially utilising diary methods (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003) as a data collection technique, could also assist in examining how phenomena such as 'participative dialogue' operate to shape the context for co-directed learning inside the SME. Finally it must be recognised that this study is limited by its focus on UK-based organisations, and therefore results may not be applicable within other cultural environments and national business systems. Further research could usefully extend the work presented here by adding an inter-cultural element, comparing SMEs operating in different parts of the world, exploring how contrasting cultural and business contexts impact upon the findings arrived at by this study.

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Table One: Participating Organisations

Organisation A		
Approximate size (f/t equivalent employees): 150	*Sector: Healthcare*	*Interviews completed:8*
Context: While part of a larger, UK wide group this organisation operates as an autonomous unit. It has responsibility for service delivery and developing improvements for those services as well as its own financial position. Due to the sector of operation "Red Tape" can rule out certain ideas but this organisation actively seeks to develop new services for its customers.		
Organisation B		
Approximate size (f/t equivalent employees): 130	*Sector: Arts*	*Interviews completed: 12*
Context: Having existed in its current form since the early 1980's, this creative organisation (run as a charity) has sought to provide the community with access to the arts. Cuts in grants and external funding have meant that this organisation has been required to make difficult decisions in recent times, making savings whilst still providing creative output.		
Organisation C		
Approximate size (f/t equivalent employees): 55	*Sector: Marine / Manufacturing*	*Interviews completed: 10*
Context: This well established organisation has grown over recent years with a significant sum of money invested in the construction of new buildings and facilities for customers. While the organisation itself is traditional in nature, the current owner/manager is seeking to inject greater creativity into the workforce, expanding the business into "non-traditional" areas.		
Organisation D		
Approximate size (f/t equivalent employees): 45	*Sector: Social Enterprise*	*Interviews completed: 4*
Context: Being a social enterprise, this organisation is subject to different pressures and expectations than others in the sample. Primarily a creative business, this organisation and the individuals it employs are constantly seeking out new ideas, knowledge and information. The environment within the organisation is characterised as fluid and changing with recognition that the future will be different to the present.		
Organisation E		
Approximate size (f/t equivalent employees): 32	*Sector: Public Sector*	*Interviews completed: 5*
Context: Serving the local community is the overarching goal of this small council. It is responsible for numerous functions and employs a small staff carrying out defined roles. Introduction of localism legislation has freed this organisation to take more responsibility for its strategic goals, encouraging an entrepreneurial outlook. Having said this, resistance to change is a key issue facing this organisation.		
Organisation F		
Approximate size (f/t equivalent employees): 15	*Sector: Leisure*	*Interviews completed: 7*
Context: Originally started in the late 1920's this organisation has existed in its current form for a considerable period of time. While characterised as "traditional" in its approach, this organisation recognises that it needs to reinvent itself for the future and is led by a management committee, membership of which changes at regular intervals.		
Organisation G		

Approximate size (f/t equivalent employees): 11	*Sector: Retail / Tourism*	*Interviews completed: 3*
Context: This organisation has a history dating back to the 17th century with the present owner purchasing it during the mid-1990s. While the industry as a whole has declined significantly in recent times, this organisation has survived by diversifying its operations. The owner doesn't have a formal strategy for the future, instead taking a reactive approach to opportunities and threats.		

Organisation H		
Approximate size (f/t equivalent employees): 4	*Sector: Community Interest Company*	*Interviews completed: 2*
Context: Existing since 2009, this company is still relatively young and experiences difficulties associated with its limited resources. Employees typically have an arts-focused background and this extends into the working environment with the office being more of a "studio". The founders are attempting to develop the organisation by building links with partner organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors.		

Organisation I		
Approximate size (f/t equivalent employees): 3	*Sector: Software Design*	*Interviews completed: 3*
Context: Founded in the mid 1990's, this organisation seeks to take an innovative approach to developing computer software and associated tools. The owner/manager has sought to develop the business gradually over time and deals with a range of clients from the UK, and overseas, in a variety of sectors including secondary and tertiary education.		

Organisation J		
Approximate size (f/t equivalent employees): 3	*Sector: Consultancy*	*Interviews completed: 3*
Context: This micro consultancy firm was started by the present owner/manager in the mid 2000's. It has grown steadily since that time, with the owner seeking to expand the firm organically without external funding. The firm has successfully developed its client base, with the pace of expansion now quickening.		

Table Two: First-Order Codes and Second-Order Themes

First-Order Codes		Second-Order Themes
Resources Emergent learning Short-term planning Exploration Constraints Employee as expert	Employee-driven Risk-taking New directions Opportunistic Diverse thinking Divergence	Boosting idea generation through employee self-direction in learning ***Definition:*** *SMEs found to generate many new ideas enabled elements of self-direction within the learning process.*
Continuous conversations Non-linear Employee-led Objective setting Multiple voices Co-determination	Stunted One directional Discussion Consensus building Involvement	Participative dialogue ***Definition:*** *Inclusion of both managerial and employee voices in learning conversations, with both parties contributing to discussions that shape the learning 'space'.*
Learning to learn Two-way learning Probing/questioning Growth Non-directive (manager)	Reflection Challenging Level of experience	Learning how to learn: Critical self-appraisal ***Definition:*** *Individual reflection on one's own skills/knowledge/abilities and the independent identification of development directions, guided through non-directive challenge from managers.*