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Workplace learning for fair work on digital labour platforms

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Abstract

Digital labour platforms, due to their organisational form and algorithmic management, set new challenges for workplace learning. This chapter highlights the issues of fairness of work and investigates the fairness-related problems, benefits and development ideas described by platform workers, particularly focusing on the workers' experiences with the rating schemes affecting their ranking, self-evaluation and remuneration. Learning opportunities are a part of fair work, but learning is also present in the processes of workers' efforts to understand, act in accordance with and influence the mostly algorithmically managed rating systems. Based on the interviews with a food courier and a freelancer working on and through two virtual labour platforms, the findings show how fair work is intertwined in multiple ways with the (lack of) transparency of rating, and how instrumental, interpersonal and deontic perspectives on fairness are present in platform work. By using the cultural-historical activity theory framework, we interpret and discuss workers' learning efforts through various dimensions of expansion. We argue that non-traditional conceptualisations and research mindsets are needed to reconceptualise digital labour platforms as workplaces and as environments of workplace learning to improve fairness.

Introduction

The practice of outsourcing temporary tasks to workers via digital labour platforms is increasing globally. Central in this platform work is the triadic relationship between requesters or clients, workers and the platform provider, the latter playing a crucial role in shaping the working conditions (Fieseler et al., 2019; Vallas & Schor, 2020). Digital labour platforms are virtual service platforms that allow people to offer, accept and perform work tasks while providing the means for economic transactions (Poutanen et al., 2020, p. 3). Digital labour platforms can be *online*, where workers perform tasks or assignments online, or *location-based*, where workers carry out tasks in person in specified physical locations (International Labour Office, 2021, p. 18). Work tasks on both online web-based and location-based platforms can be simple, routine activities or projects demanding experts. In this chapter, a platform *worker* refers to an individual – usually without an employment contract with the platform – who performs tasks or projects through the platform. Platform workers are also called “gig workers” or “crowdworkers” in the literature. Workers, as well as clients or requesters of work, are *users* of the mediation services offered by platform providers. Digital labour platforms in their diverse forms represent changing social and economic circumstances that set new challenges for workplace learning.

This chapter investigates workplace learning from the point of view of fairness of work. Workers judge the platform based on fairness arguments (Fieseler et al., 2019), which affect their decisions to cease or continue working, to speak up (Gegenhuber et al., 2021), or commitment and approach to rules. Moreover, as a novel form of organising work, labour platforms often operate beyond limiting regulations, which makes fairness-related issues, such as transparency, responsibility, learning opportunities and just distribution of benefits, important in the public discussion about the pros and cons of the platform economy. While algorithmic management is also becoming popular outside platform work, the study of platform features' fairness has relevance for workplace learning in general (Berástegui, 2021; Ifenthaler, 2018) and workers' expansive learning efforts in particular (Engeström, 2011; Toiviainen et al., 2012).

This chapter presents data from two platform work environments: one from a location-based food courier service that does not have specific educational requirements and the other from an online web-based platform supplying freelancer specialists for clients' projects. Based on previous research, we anticipated a difference between these two types of platform work in terms of learning opportunities and fairness of work (Margaryan, 2019). We ask: how do workers' experiences shape the possibilities of workplace learning to achieve fair work on digital platforms?

The social and economic circumstances of platform work

A platform worker's relationship with the working environment is shaped by many social and economic features characteristic of this type of work, such as a rating system that indicates the worker's competence on the platform. Historically, the rating system of labour platforms has represented a mechanism through which interacting strangers can build necessary trust (Sundararajan, 2016). It is also a mechanism of evaluating and archiving the history of a worker's career success on the platform. Platform companies' business models allow them to financially benefit from the data collected through rating systems that can be used either inside or outside the platform company. Besides financial compensation, workers get scores from clients and the platform, which shapes their success and reputation on the platform.

Across all platform work, workers' dependence on the income gained through the platform significantly affects how they experience the fairness of work (Schor, 2020). It seems that workers benefit from the freedom and flexibility offered by platform work best when they do not rely on the platform income. When there are no alternatives, they are obliged to accept unfair conditions and bear risks. This is especially the case in domains where the labour market is imbalanced, with many workers applying for a limited number of tasks (Lehdonvirta, 2018). The general trend in platform labour is that the supply exceeds demand (International Labour Office, 2021).

So far, regulation of platform work is low. Court appeals have been reported concerning location-based platform work, such as for food couriers or taxi drivers, where most violations of decent working conditions occur and where the criteria for platform workers' employment status (whether they are employees or entrepreneurs) are unclear. Legislators in the EU and Finland are trying to find solutions when the novelty of platform work, in many ways, disrupts institutional circumstances of traditional employment.

Many workers do platform work part time, either as a supplement to their main job or as a temporary activity during career and life transitions. Besides income, workers may have various motives – including learning, attracting customers and building a reputation – but independence and flexibility often figure as the main incentives (Pajarinen et al., 2018; Schor, 2020). Heterogeneity, rather than homogeneity, of platform workers can be the most significant structural element of digital labour platforms (Vallas & Schor, 2020). In our cases, the workers were *couriers* delivering food locally from restaurants to clients on the “CourierPlatform” and *freelancers* doing knowledge-based jobs online for global clients on the “OnlinePlatform”.

The fairness of work on virtual platforms

Fairness questions are key when people try to meet their personal needs in social contexts such as workplaces (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Crawshaw et al. (2013) depicted three perspectives on fairness: instrumental, interpersonal and deontic. The instrumental perspective holds that fairness is important due to material and economic considerations. Remuneration and safe work environments are examples of instrumental fairness questions in platform work. From an interpersonal perspective, fairness contributes to the quality of social relationships. If interpersonal relationships are good, individuals may remain loyal to an organisation even though outcomes, such as instrumental factors of remuneration or material working conditions, are less favourable. From a deontic perspective, fairness is important for its own sake. Work is considered more meaningful and fulfilling in ethical environments (Crawshaw et al., 2013).

Perceived workplace fairness is associated with workers’ well-being and psychological health (Fieseler et al., 2019, p. 990). In organisational justice literature, fairness is often examined in terms of being distributive, dealing with the distribution of the resources, rewards and compensation for work, or procedural, referring to the fairness of organisational decision processes. Interactive fairness is experienced in vertical and horizontal social relationships connected, for example, to the communication of decisions, and may be further specified in terms of interpersonal fairness (human dignity and respect) and informational fairness (communication, access to information; Berástegui, 2021; Fieseler et al., 2019).

When assessing fairness, people generate benchmarks or frames of reference (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). According to the Fairwork Foundation, the principles of fairness in gigwork and cloudwork are fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management and fair representation (www.Fair.work), which may serve as bases for such references. Learning has a dual position in relation to fairness: it is efforts expended to deal with questions of fairness, but it is also a part of the concept of work fairness. By examining worker efforts to improve the fairness of platform work, we aim to better understand the opportunities for learning that may exist in digital work environments.

The labour platform as a site for workplace learning

In her comparative survey, Margaryan (2019) found differences between the learning activities undertaken by workers on two kinds of online web-based platforms: microworkers and online freelancers. Microwork consists of simple, short-term tasks, such as annotating images or moderating content. Tasks or projects undertaken by online freelancers may include translation, carrying out legal and financial services, or doing design and software development. The association with learning was relatively weak in microwork lacking any specialised skill requirements beyond basic computer and Internet literacy (Margaryan, 2019, p. 251). Freelancers, in contrast, reported various learning practices and strategies, such as courses, tutorials and receiving feedback. Their work consists of complex tasks that require

specialised, professional skills. Margaryan's (2019) study indicated that workplace learning activities are emerging in online web-based work like in any work. Platform providers should therefore be aware of individual learning needs and opportunities when designing for tasks and workflows, visibility of workers' qualifications and social interaction among workers. On the level of individual behaviour, however, the visibility and transparency aspects of work have also received criticism. Being aware of the visibility of organisational operations, workers may modify their actions in a way that is contrary to innovation and learning (Bernstein, 2012; Leonardi & Treem, 2020).

In the framework of the cultural-historical activity theory, expansive learning is defined as a transformative process engaging entire collectives and networks in the development of activity to solve complex system-level problems (Engeström, 2011). It starts from individuals' questioning of and deviating from "the existing order and logic of their activity" (Engeström, 2011, p. 91). The understanding of how expansive learning takes place in virtual communities in general and in platform work in particular is thus far incomplete. However, we find the study of individual workers' learning actions meaningful as actual-empirical/historical documentation and groundwork for a deeper understanding in the future.

Learning actions are expansive to the extent that they open up the object of activity in its complexity and richness while helping learners find solutions to the developmental contradictions (Engeström, 2011). In workplace learning, this includes workers' possibilities for expanding their learning space in multiple dimensions – social-spatial, material-instrumental, moral-ethical, political-economic, personal-professional and temporal-developmental (Toiviainen et al., 2021). When working virtually on the platform, however, what are the possibilities and digital resources for exceeding the boundaries, for example, social-spatially and material-instrumentally, to act, interact, have influence and receive feedback? Put in this way, we see learning opportunities as a necessary part of the fair work discussed above.

Data

The entire data set was comprised of individual interviews with 19 workers, collected between 2017 and 2019, that have been analysed in other studies investigating the challenges of platform work (Seppänen et al., 2018; Seppänen et al., 2019; Seppänen et al., 2021). This work provided us with a background for selecting two interviews (Steven's and Nick's) to reveal the workers' fairness experiences representative of two types of platform work.

Both Steven and Nick had experience with being economically dependent on the platform income, but not exclusively so. They had alternatives outside their respective platforms and were capable of being analytical concerning the pros and cons of work, fairness and individual improvement efforts. Steven had the perspective of a self-employed freelance worker, whereas Nick used the CourierPlatform from the perspective of an employer–employee relationship.

Steven, a 42-year-old freelancer on a global online freelancing platform, came from a Western English-speaking country and lived in Finland, working with writing and editing tasks. As a self-employed person, he started to work on the OnlinePlatform three years before the interview, when it was difficult to find work in Finland with his expertise. In the initial stages, he was economically very dependent on the platform income, and his relationship with the platform was both positive and negative. At the time of the interview, he had gained Finnish clients and more independence, and he regarded the OnlinePlatform as a safety net and "sort of a necessary evil" for freelancers.

Nick, 27 years old and originating from a Central Asian state, came to Finland to attend a study programme and had worked for the location-based CourierPlatform during the previous 1.5 years as his only source of income. As he had some debts, he was dependent on the platform income. Due to health issues, he was working from his car in areas less favourable for courieriing tasks and income, and therefore he was not rated in the group of the best couriers on the platform. At the time of the interview, the CourierPlatform had radically weakened conditions for workers due to competition in the field. Nick thought he could not find a new job during summer and was stuck with courieriing. However, he thought his forthcoming status as a university student may solve the economic situation and allow him to exit food courier work.

Problems, benefits and development ideas of fairness

The analysis started by identifying the fairness-related issues in the data, both inductively by paying attention to subjective expressions previously coded in the two interview transcripts and deductively by considering objective criteria of fairness, such as compensation, communication and learning possibilities (as described above). Of the 105 total data excerpts related to fair work, 72 dealt with fairness problems, 13 with fairness benefits and 20 with development ideas.

“Fairness problems” referred to the circumstances limiting platform workers’ activity in unfair ways, causing difficulties in understanding the platform mechanisms or in societal labour issues. Fairness problems require a responsible party to be accountable for the fairness issue (Fieseler et al., 2019). For example, Steven felt it was unfair that the operating algorithm of the platform makes customers pay attention to a worker’s number of previous working hours, whereas he was almost always working based on a total project fee. Thus, the problem is that certain project contracts do not accumulate the number of working hours that are displayed in the OnlinePlatform system as an important measure of a worker’s activity and experience. An ordering customer who is not aware of this principle may misinterpret the record of a potential freelancer. Steven formulated this as a collective fairness problem among many freelancers.

It’s just something, if you’re posting a job as a client, you have these forms to fill in and it says what fields, or what are the parameters that you would like your freelancers to fall under. And it’s like 0 hours, 10 hours, 100 hours, and for some reason, people think, “Oh, well, they have to have [at least]100 hours on [the OnlinePlatform]”. But what those clients don’t know is that if you have a project fee history then you won’t have any hours. Some people could be there working for 10 years and have hundreds of thousands of dollars of earnings but have zero hours. So it’s totally stupid.

The “fairness benefits” manifested positive experiences, such as experienced support for freelancers, good communication or fair working logic of the platform. Platform work’s flexibility was considered an overall fairness benefit for workers. For example, Nick experienced the CourierPlatform’s contact service as being supportive of freelancers when troubles arose.

...there is some person who really takes care about what we are doing. (...) And if something happens in the field, maybe if my car is broken, so they have to find someone else to take the food, to come here, then we can text them. (...) They really don’t force us in everything.

The “development ideas” referred to our informants’ initiatives to solve or improve problematic practices linked to fairness aspects. They were suggestions made to the platform representative or personal changes in their own work practices. For instance, Nick realised that he had no idea about the rights he was entitled to in the freelancing contract with the company, so he went to talk to a lawyer to solve his experienced unfairness:

...once I even talked to a lawyer about this, and they said, “Well it’s a big trial if you’re gonna go, that [you go to court against the CourierPlatform]. It’s up to you if you wanna go or not”. Because I can’t have enough confidence to fight about [the CourierPlatform] myself, it’s a bit trial, it may take years to change the system.

The problems, benefits and development ideas of fairness expressed by Steven and Nick were further grouped into five themes dealing with fairness related to income and occupational health, platform practices, workers’ lives and competence, global fairness and societal fairness. These themes align with what is known about the conditions of fair work, especially in platform work (Berástegui, 2021; Heeks et al., 2021, p. 4). Rather than repeating what is already known, we decided to focus on a topic central to platform functioning: the rating schemes of labour platforms. If participation in social communities and interaction between participants who have different types of experience and capacities are virtues of learning at work, what are the learning possibilities on virtual platforms where social interaction is mediated by algorithms (Le Breton & Galière, in press; Wood et al., 2019)?

Fairness of rating: problems, benefits and learning opportunities

Rating systems used on virtual labour platforms are based on algorithms that regulate workers’ records, their work activity, success, etc. How the work performance and excellence are accumulating in the system is a vital question for workers, since their records, as an outcome of the algorithmic rating principles, are openly displayed for the scrutiny of potential customers and other workers competing for the same work orders on the OnlinePlatform. It is not enough that workers are active and perform well; to succeed, they also need to learn to understand how the platform rates their performance and how their reputation is formed. The rating system of the CourierPlatform typically involves straightforward rating, such as the number of deliveries per work shift, the time taken from the moment the order is received to the moment of delivery to the customer, as well as customer feedback. In the case of a problem at the time of delivery, such as a long delay or cold food, the courier is not allowed to explain the reason even though it may not be an individual mistake but a systemic problem, such as too few drivers on a shift. On the CourierPlatform, the platform makes the allocation between worker and client, and on the OnlinePlatform, clients, mediated via the platform’s rating system, make the match.

An algorithm-based rating is a critical issue of fairness because users often experience it as non-transparent. Workers – freelancers and couriers alike – often struggle to understand and potentially influence the rating system. What are the problems and benefits of rating, how do workers deal with them, and what learning opportunities are there for fair work?

Fairness problems and benefits of rating

After Steven finished a project, he could directly see the score given by the client. The way in which the rating system mediates the worker–client relationship caused Steven uncertainty and feelings of unfairness.

I never know (...) whether I'm going to get a good rating, and I hate guessing, waiting to know what they're going to say. I think a lot of my stress relates to how they evaluate your job success. The risk of losing your rating is very stressful.

Sometimes his ratings went down, which may have affected his chances of gaining new clients and projects. The rating system gave Steven an advantage because it helped in the competition against other freelancers. However, it is a mystery how activity on the platform, income details and many other factors affect a freelancer's score. His critique was regarding the lack of transparency, not the principle of being rated by clients and the platform.

Steven once interrupted a project with a "difficult" client. The fairness benefit was that the OnlinePlatform allowed the project to be deleted from Steven's job history. Thus, the possibly bad scores given by this client would not lower Steven's score on the platform. This is possible once or twice per year for each freelancer based on a collective rule concerning the rating system.

While the rating system on the OnlinePlatform is open, on the CourierPlatform, it is closed and used mainly by the platform team, based on data produced by couriers via the system, and clients. Nick identified this type of straightforward performance rating as a fairness benefit: high performance can lead to individual benefits. The group of high-performance couriers can choose work shifts first; however, this means that the most profitable shifts are already gone by the time other groups can choose. Here the fairness problems materialise. If the food delivery is delayed, the courier gets minus points, which affects their prospective chances of gaining profitable work shifts. Food couriers' relationship with the platform is peculiar: although couriers may experience fairness problems on behalf of the platform, at the same time, they identify themselves as being part of an exciting and innovative start-up scene.

Nick claimed that the platform does not make allowances for unavoidable delays, such as traffic, weather and restaurants being late. This, and other similar practices, made Nick feel "trapped": "Contract seems really nice, so much freedom, okay salary, but the practical is horrible"; lose his desire to work on this platform: "I don't think, if it is, if it gives any sense to work here anymore"; and even question the human rights of his work: "In the perspective of human rights, that's not good if I have to work 60–70 hours to survive in my daily life." While freedom and flexibility are praised as benefits of platform work, the repercussions of this trade-off can be negative due to the rating system, as Nick learned.

These examples show that rating systems give rise to both fairness problems and benefits. They also show how the instrumental perspective (remuneration and material working conditions), interpersonal perspective (workers' relationships with their clients and with the platform) and even the deontic perspective (human rights) of fairness are present in the experiences of rating systems or their outcomes.

Fairness of rating and expansive learning efforts

Workers' struggles and initiatives to improve the rating system and related platform practices particularly from the point of view of fairness can be analysed as expansive learning efforts that intertwine in the flow of daily work (Toiviainen et al., 2012). Workers may simply contact the platform provider to direct attention towards examples of unfair functionality. Steven noticed that customers looking for good workers more easily choose the previously cumulated number of working hours rather than the dollars earned due to the parameter (see the fairness problem example above): "...they said to me that

they [are] trying to fix that because it doesn't make sense; if you've worked for three years and you only got 66 hours, it's impossible." Nick thought that it should be important to record the couriers' driving manners and traffic accidents both as an issue of occupational safety and in terms of affecting the amount of earnings. He was aware that as a freelancer, he held the status of a partner rather than an employee, meaning that the platform is not obligated to keep a record: *"They don't recognise (...) that kind of situation. But someone should really look [at] how are we driving."* Here, the workers' learning efforts were directed towards the distant or unknown "they" who control the rating system.

Workers may also actively investigate and try to trace the logic of the rating system by themselves. Steven contacted the support centre of the platform to ask the reason for his decreasing ranks displayed in workers' records: *"...they just send out this form email and they say that they really can't do anything about it, it's the way the system works."* The platform support was responsive but did not add transparency to help him understand the logic of rating. Payments are also linked with the rating system. Nick struggled to find out how the compensation system really worked, as it did not quite correspond to what was written in the contract between a courier and the platform.

It took two weeks for me to figure out how are they paying. (...) All day I was analysing (...) and every hour, every task, I was copying in my textbook and analysing those things. And then I found out that the situation is tricky.

As a response to Nick's problem concerning the payment system, the platform suggested couriers work more and achieve bonuses. Although both platforms offered a possibility of contact between the platform and the workers, these learning efforts did not lead to problem solving and co-creation.

Workers may also discover small tricks to "teach" the algorithmic monitoring system so that their performance is favourably rated and displayed. Steven learned that it is necessary to gain at least some income on the platform in order to maintain his profile. Although he had recently preferred local clients to those found via the OnlinePlatform, he wanted to maintain his platform profile by being active on it. Sutherland et al. (2020) described this aptly as workers subverting or circumventing the platform's structures by way of controlling their professional processes and autonomy. Whether these tactical learning efforts to improve fairness should be seen as increasing workers' skills at playing the game or enhancing their growth in entrepreneurship remains an open question.

Some efforts make workers activists who cross boundaries and assume new roles and perspectives. Steven signed into the platform in a client role, which significantly helped in learning how the platform works, particularly how the platform collects information about freelancers from clients. More importantly, acting as a client provided transparency regarding the social circumstances of the platform:

And my mind was blown, I was like peeling back the curtains at the end of Wizard of Oz, it was like, "Oh, this is how it works, this is what my clients are seeing when I'm applying." You see how many people are applying for every job, where they are living, how much they charge, what they're writing about themselves.

Nick brought up his concerns about unfairness to a labour union representative and got in contact with a Member of Parliament and a radio journalist. This can be a sign of learning for active citizenship in a digitalised world, even if the change he was striving for will not take place quickly.

Discussion and conclusion

Workplace learning is an indisputable part of the pursuit of fair work on virtual labour platforms, and vice-versa. Learning opportunities materialise in workers' experiences with the fairness problems, benefits and development ideas related to the platform practices. In the digitalised environment, interaction is mediated by algorithmic management, considerably diminishing the immediate social exchange between the key actors: the workers, platform supervision and the clientele. Despite the problems and limitations associated with labour platforms, they offer opportunities for an increasing amount of the global population to access work and income. This fairness benefit stems from the possibilities of self-employment in unstable labour markets. Workers often value the flexibility and autonomy offered by platform work. Learning actions (Margaryan, 2019) and even co-creation (Seppänen et al., 2021) may emerge on platforms. Nevertheless, we are only starting to understand labour platforms as workplaces and as environments of workplace learning. We argue that new conceptualisations and research mindsets rather than applications of established models developed in the context of the so-called traditional workplaces are needed.

Despite the rapid development of digital labour platforms, we think that the fundamental fairness problems and benefits are still relevant in actual platform work. Our contribution has been to focus on the platforms' rating systems that crucially affect workers' remuneration, self-evaluation, goal setting and social position in the platform ecosystem. The rating system lacks transparency and sets challenges to learning. How platform workers respond to these challenges can be analysed as expansive efforts of workplace learning for fairer work.

Margaryan (2019) called for a qualitative approach to understand platform workers' (microworkers' and online freelancers') learning practices in more detail and in context. We have aimed to answer this call. We wish to further advance the conceptual understanding of workplace learning by embedding it in the notion of fair work, not solely in individual professional development and motivation. Historically, fair terms and conditions of employment have been achieved through negotiation and mass power by entire interest groups. In the face of new forms of employment, workers' fairness conceptualisations become more heterogeneous, and the responsibility for achieving fairness and engaging in learning opportunities is at risk of remaining on the shoulders of individual workers. We argue that platform workers' initiatives for fairness should be analysed as expansive learning efforts oriented towards better interaction and learning opportunities on a collective level.

The first effort, contacting the platform, was a socially and spatially expansive action from a worker to a platform provider. The platform as an interaction partner was, however, experienced as faceless – the party accountable for fairness (Fieseler et al., 2019) remained distant. Whether their initiatives were responded to or not is incidental, and, in this sense, the social conditions of learning remained unfavourable.

The setting was very similar in the second effort, in which the workers studied the rating and compensation systems and contacted the platform to enhance its functionality and transparency. Their efforts were materially and instrumentally expansive: Steven trying to make sense of the freelancer ranking system indicating a worker's success, and Nick struggling with calculations to find out the logic of the compensation system. These learning efforts, trying to reveal the processes by which fairness problems or benefits are produced, are indicative of procedural justice (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Both efforts dealt with the earnings of work and thus also pursued expansion in an economic dimension. Individu-

ally, they learned from their inquiries, which in Margaryan's (2019) framework may fall into the strategies of self-regulated learning. However, a weak response from the platform's side made learning as a collective endeavour for fair work partial.

The third type of learning effort was using small tricks and "teaching" the rating system to display some records in favour of the worker. The workers' learning of these tricks demonstrates their digital skills and strategies to maintain professional autonomy (Sutherland et al., 2020), but it did not lead to better transparency and fairness of the rating system. Platform workers with an entrepreneurial orientation can be inclined towards this type of learning effort (Seppänen et al., 2019). Individual deviations and rule bending are interpreted as potential signs of the need for changing an activity (Engeström, 2011). The first steps towards change, however, would mean analysing the tricks used by the entire community. The platform provider as a company may, often unilaterally, analyse workers' behaviour through their data, and indeed may use these analyses for improving the fairness performance of their operations, at least when it helps the retention or growth of their user ecosystems, or in cases of external pressure.

The fourth way of dealing with the rating system was the workers making efforts to take activist roles beyond their assumed worker position. Learning may take place through boundary-crossing (e.g., Akkerman & Bruining, 2016) and perspective-taking, which means expansion on the social-spatial as well as the political-economic dimensions (Toiviainen et al., 2021). Examples from these two cases were Steven taking on a customer's role in the platform system and Nick contacting political players. In the confines of this analysis, it remains an open question whether these efforts led to the development of fairer working conditions; we have our potential doubts. For instance, freelancers acting as "clients" may also lead to unfair opportunistic actions when they hire "subcontractors" with low pay (Wood et al., 2019). Still, seeing platform workers stepping out of the roles they are given in virtual workplaces may become a necessary step in challenging all stakeholders to react and possibly collaborate in workplace development and learning (as examples, see Cedefop, 2020).

Ultimately, workers implement various approaches when acting with and influencing the rating system and trying to figure out how the system works. The problem with transparency is that the rating systems are business secrets. Labour platforms may display the rough outlines of rating but are unable to reveal specific weightings to prevent gaming the system and for business confidentiality reasons (Cedefop, 2020, p. 49). The digital, faceless-owner type of closed service system of the platform is very different from the models of expertise-based professional services that we are used to in our societies, as Nerland and Hasu (2020) argued. Digital systems carry promises of efficiency and ease; both users and workers are expected to act immediately on the information that is displayed to promptly make space for new issues. Instead of providing an opportunity for learning at work in the form of participation in epistemic practices, the worker (and customer) is often tied to learning "simple solutions" of the platform (Nerland & Hasu, 2020). Platform workers' learning efforts to become a "critical audience" (Kemper & Kolkman, 2018) through finding out how algorithmic mechanisms work is a key issue; dealing with the fairness problems may act as a springboard to this learning. It is likely that communities, processes and forums outside the labour platforms' core mechanisms are needed to enhance platform workers' learning (Cedefop, 2020), especially when striving for expansive learning and a system-level change (Engeström, 2011). The use of technology by digital labour platforms, rather than technology per se, may cause unfairness (Bailey et al., 2022). Fairness issues trigger expansive efforts in platform work, but algorithmic management and the scale, individualisation (Fleming, 2017) and speed of operation enabled by technology seem to restrict expansive learning understood as a collective endeavour to develop work practices (Engeström, 2011).

The question of learning for fairness is timely in platform work. The same platform mechanisms may produce both empowering fairness benefits and marginalising fairness problems (Deng et al., 2016), particularly when considering the heterogeneity of platform workers' needs and interests (Vallas & Schor, 2020). Moreover, workers' economic dependence may limit their possibilities for acting and learning. Questions of fairness call for new learning efforts from labour platforms, their users and workplace learning scholars alike. The conditions can be beneficial to some people in some circumstances, but also include trade-offs and negative outcomes for them or for others. The moral-ethical dimension of learning spaces (Toiviainen et al., 2021) and accountability are the keys to those who design, possess, use or regulate digital tools, algorithms and platforms at work. Our study demonstrates that fairness issues of digital technology in its various social and economic circumstances are of increasing importance for scholarship in workplace learning.

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