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Workplace Trainers' Reflective Theories

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Abstract

This paper reports on an investigation (currently in progress) of theories held by workplace trainers about training practices in contested terrains of the corporate culture. These trainers, enrolled in postgraduate studies at UNENR, undertook reflective examination of their own practices. Drawing on the work of theorists such as Schon (1983, 1987 and 1991), Weil & McGill (1989), Mezirow (1991), Marsick & Watkins (1990), trainers developed processes to assist them become more critically reflective trainer practitioners. Specifically this study reports the first stage of data analysis. A second stage focusing on the theories held about the corporate culture will be presented at a forthcoming International Conference (Jennings, 1992).

Introduction

This paper reports the first stage analysis of qualitative research study which focuses on the theories held by trainers in workplace settings. The parameters of the second stage analysis will be summarily presented. Data collection involved the compilation of documentary evidence provided by trainers through their engagement in a postgraduate course. In this program, they were encouraged to complete assignments and professional journals as a means of reflecting on their workplace practices. An earlier version of this paper was first presented at the Action Learning Conference in Brisbane (Jennings & Jennings, 1992).

Participants in the Study

Students were first enrolled in this course (UNE, NR Graduate Diploma in Education, Training and Development) in the autumn semester of 1991. The first intake of students has completed six of the following units:

Unit 1: An Introduction to Training

Unit 2: Adult Learning

Unit 3: Training Methods

Unit 4: Instructional Design and Educational Technology

Unit 5: Evaluation and Researching Practice

Unit 7: Program Planning

Units 6 & 8 Project

Within Unit 5, students had access to the following 50 hour modules:

Core Module A : Researching Training Practices

Elective Module B: Quantitative Methods for Trainers

 Module C: Qualitative Methods for Trainers

 Module D: Epistemology, Research & the Trainer

- Module E: Action Research
- Module F: Evaluation Models
- Module G: Collaboration and Collegiality
- Module H: Negotiated Contract

In developing materials for the Graduate Diploma course and in analyzing the responses of industry trainers to their off campus materials, the course team has been influenced by a wide range of theorists within the following content areas:

- Learning from Experience (Kolb, Bawden, Revans, Marsick and Watkins, and Argyris)
- Reflection (Boud, Keogh and Walker, Schon and Argyris, Smyth, Sparks Langer and Coulter)
- Critical Reflection (Habermas, Mezirow, Carr and Kemmis, Brookfield and Marsick)
- Collaboration and Collegiality (Johnson and Johnson, Shumsky,

Sagor, Kemmis & McTaggart, and Smyth.)

In completing these modules, students have been encouraged to keep a professional journal and/or to complete assignments as a means of reflecting on their workplace practices. Their responses to these activities form a data base for a research study currently being conducted at UNENR.

First Stage of Data Analysis

Initially, the researcher (as well as being lecturer on the course) was interested in the question of what the trainers had learned from the experience of engagement in the reflective content of the module material. This concern tended to direct the first stage of analysis as the researcher began to reflexively feed back the student's work into the reconstruction phase of the modules. The following concerns of the researcher directed stage one analysis:

- Learning From Experience

Industry trainers represent a newly-emerging professional group, exhibiting a wide variety of backgrounds. Unlike other educators, they cannot draw upon a common store of knowledge which derives from an established pre-service training course. Often they take on the role of industry trainer after demonstrating practical expertise in the workplace and then develop their trainer skills "on-the-job" or through attendance at "train-the-trainer courses" where they are exposed to a growing body of espoused theories on adult learning and training methods.

In this context, it is relevant to examine the work of theorists such as David Kolb (1984) who promote an experiential view of learning and educational practitioners such as Richard Bawden (1990) who have put many of these ideas into practice. It is relevant to take into account the body of knowledge on Action Learning which stems from the work of Reg Revans (1973, 1983) and also those forms of incidental and informal learning which

have been examined in detail by Marsick and Watkins (1990). Brookfield (1987) has drawn upon the work of Rubin (1976) to suggest that workplaces have been characterised by "received" knowledge rather than "created" knowledge. Finally, it is worth noting the notions of work described by Argyris & Schon (1974) with respect to practitioners' "espoused theories" and "theories-in-use."

Students enrolled in the Grad Dip course at UNENR have been exposed to many of these ideas particularly in the core module of Unit 5 and in their assignment work, so it became appropriate to address the following issues:

What evidence has been provided in students' journals and term papers regarding:

- The importance of "learning from experience" in the development of their training skills (following the Kolb model).

* See some supportive evidence in Appendix A:

"Lisa" 5D Paragraph 2

- Their ability to distinguish between "espoused theories" and "theories in use" as suggested by Argyris & Schon.

* See some supportive and contrary evidence in Appendix A:

"Gino" 5A Paragraphs 2, 4, 5, 8, 11

- The relevance of incidental and informal sources of practical wisdom as suggested by Marsick and Watkins.

* See some contrary evidence in Appendix A:

"Gino" 5A Paragraph 14

- The significance of workplaces as centres of both "received" and "created" knowledge. (Brookfield quotes Rubin's World of Pain - "Only a tiny minority of us are involved in inventing our present, let alone our future - ordinary men and women struggle along with received truths, received ways of being and doing." Is this the trainer's lot?)

* See some supportive evidence in Appendix A:

"Gino" 5A Paragraphs 15, 16, 17

- The relevance of Reg Revans' action learning equation ($L = P + Q$) where learning on the job (L) is seen to be a function of programmed instruction (P) plus questioning and inquiry (Q). The point should be made however that some commentators regard the Revans equation to be limited to the extent that it doesn't take reflection into account.

- Reflecting on Practice

There are of course many definitions of the term "reflection", but in the context of the course being described here, the attention of students has been directed to the ideas on

reflection put forward by Boud, Keogh & Walker (1985) and Smyth (1989). Students' attention has been drawn to the significance of reflection in the processes of experiential learning, clinical supervision and action research. The concepts of reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action have been drawn from the work of Argyris and Schon and the later work of Boud, Keogh & Walker. Schon's (1983, 1987, 1991) emerging concept of the "Reflective Practitioner" has had a significant impact on the course. Reference has been made to recent research articles which identify different types of research. In this context Sparks-Langer and Coulton (1991) have provided a synthesis of research, identifying cognitive, critical and narrative forms of reflection. In a number of modules, students have been encouraged to keep personal, professional journals as a means of aiding the reflection process. In this respect, the process outlined by Holly (1984) has been highly recommended. Following the work of Kelly (1963) and Candy (1982) on Personal Construct Theory, there would appear to be some benefit to be gained from exploring the connections between personal construct theory and students' ability to be self reflective.

Keeping in mind the types of inputs noted above, we can examine whether students' responses provide evidence that:

- The importance of reflection is recognised and linked to experiential learning (after Boud, Keogh & Walker; Smyth)

* See some supportive evidence in Appendix A:

"Paul" 5G Paragraphs 5b and 6b (Conclusion)

- Trainers are able to engage in reflection on action by returning to experience, attending to feelings and re-evaluating experience.

* See some supportive evidence in Appendix A:

"Margaret" 5A Paragraph 2

- Trainers are able to engage in reflection in action which involves the processes of noticing and intervening.

* See some supportive evidence in Appendix A:

"Mandy" 5A Paragraph 2

- The keeping of professional journals has aided the reflection process (as outlined by Holly).

* See some supportive evidence in Appendix A:

"Paul" 5G Paragraph 4b Conclusion

- Trainers can actually find time for reflection.
- Reflection leads to informed action - praxis (Carr and Kemmis).
- Particular forms of reflection - cognitive, critical, narrative - are more feasible than others (Sparks-Langer and Coulton).
- Trainers are aware of the personal constructs which influence

the reflection process but often exhibit hostility and resistance to new ideas when these conflict with deeply held views.

* See some supportive evidence in Appendix A:

"Lisa" 5D Paragraph 8

- There is an "art" in training which can be developed which is close to what Donald Schon describes in "Educating the Reflective Practitioner".

- Critical Reflection

In many of the modules offered to UNENR students, a particular emphasis has been placed on the notion of encouraging critical levels of reflection by trainers. In doing, so the course team has drawn upon the work of Jurgen Habermas (1972) who, in turn, has influenced the work of Mezirow (1981, 1990, 1991) and Carr and Kemmis (1986). Mezirow's notion of critical reflectivity has influenced Marsick (1988) and Brookfield (1986,1987) and these, in turn, have sought to encourage levels of critical reflection and critical thinking amongst practitioners. Schon (1987) and Brookfield (1987) argue that critical reflection involves more than the purely cognitive processes of analysis and speculation. Critical reflection in action is artistic, intuitive, improvisational and creative.

These levels of critical thinking have been related to the notion of double loop learning (examined by Schon and Argyis) and the related concept of metacognition. But how can individuals develop the skill of critical reflection? How can they come to recognise contradictions and power relationships and achieve empowerment?

Many of the abovementioned issues were raised in the materials provided for enrolled students. We can now examine their term papers and journals seeking evidence that:

- Trainers are able to move to a level of critical reflectivity and engage in perspective transformation, by thinking metcognitively, engaging in double loop learning and considering why they attach meanings to particular events.

* See some supportive evidence in Appendix A:

"Mandy" 5A Paragraphs 1, 5, 7

- They can achieve levels of critical reflection either on their own, or through interaction with critical friends.

* See some supportive evidence in Appendix A:

Georgina" 5A Paragraphs 1 and 2

- Individual trainers are able to recognise contradictions and power relationships and somehow achieve empowerment for themselves and others within industrial organisations.

* See some supportive evidence in Appendix A:

"Mandy" 5A Paragraph 3

"Lisa" 5C Paragraph 1

"Lisa" 5D Paragraphs 1 , 9

"Maree" 5E Paragraphs 1, 4

- Trainers recognise the links between critical reflection and artistic, creative, intuitive and improvisational work practices.
- Collaboration and Collegiality

A great deal of interest has been demonstrated within educational circles regarding the supposed benefits of collaborative and collegial actions by practitioners as they research and evaluate their practices. Cooperative learning formed a basis for the research works and writings of Johnson and Johnson (1987). In an early paper, Shumsky (1956) espoused the benefits of cooperative approaches to action research and Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) have more recently argued that action research should have these collaborative, cooperative elements. Sagor (1991) has reported on the benefits of collaborative action amongst educators while Smyth (1991) has more recently provided a significant critique of the collaborative, collegial movement. Also in a paper delivered to the first World Congress, Barry Smith (1991) examined some of

the dyadic tools which aid reflection such as listening to the ideas of others, constructive confrontation and creative idea generation (brainstorming.)

In one particular elective module offered to Graduate Diploma students, the issue of collaboration was examined in some depth. Students were invited to participate and reflect on collaborative actions. By examining their journals and term papers, it is possible to collect evidence on:

- Trainers' involvement in collaborative activity as a means of improving practice.

* See some supportive evidence in Appendix A:

"Mandy" 5G Para 1a, p.1, Paragraph 1, p.4

"Belinda" 5G Paragraphs 2, 3

"Paul" 5G Paragraphs 4a/5a

- Trainers' involvement in peer coaching, mentoring and professional networks.

* See some supportive evidence in Appendix A:

"Belinda" 5G Paragraph 6

"Mandy" 5G Paragraphs 17-20

- Aspects of critical reflection achieved through collaborative, collegial actions.
- Limitations on the power of collegial action due to the factors raised by Smyth where collegiality is used as a mechanism of control.

* See some supportive evidence in Appendix A:

"Mandy" 5G Paragraphs 6, 7

- Action research projects and clinical supervision activities where collaborative, cooperative actions have led to empowerment.

* See some supportive evidence in Appendix A:

"Gino" 5G Paragraphs 7, 11

Second Stage of Data Analysis

The first analysis stage provided the researcher with some important data about how trainers reflectively examine their practices. It provided rich evidence that supported the theoretical constructs that the researcher/lecturer had used to underpin the pedagogy in the course. But the data began to "speak" in other ways. The data provided new categories for the researcher to investigate. The study took a new turn - new data categorization emerged out of the actual data - a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As the researcher began to read beyond her initial concerns new categories began to emerge. These categories included:

- Trainer as Change Agent
- Professional Role and Effectiveness of Trainers
- Learning, Development and Personal Change
- Knowledge Legitimation
- Values and the Corporate Culture
- Employment Practices & Equity Issues
- Evaluation of Training
- Being a Reflective Practitioner

As the researcher began to immerse herself in the data, it became evident that trainers' accounts of their professional knowledge were often couched in language that was highly metaphorical. The researcher reexamined the theoretical literature on professionals' theories of action from the work of Donald Schon (1983) and then traced how other researchers such as Munby (1986) & Jones (1991) had highlighted the importance of metaphor in explaining personal constructs. Jones (1991:159) argues that metaphors help to explained constructed worldviews and hence provide the underlying conventional wisdom behind actions.

Work to Date

Currently the research project remains at the level two stage. One major paper has emerged that focuses specifically on Trainers , Values and the Corporate Culture (Jennings, 1992).

CONCLUSIONS

General Principles

The following general principles represent some motherhood statements which have appeared in the current literature on education, training and development.

- Reflection is a skill which needs to be developed and refined.
 - There are different levels of reflection through which practitioners can move.
 - Journal keeping aids the reflection process.
 - The process of revisiting journal entries is a powerful tool which enhances reflection.
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- Critical reflection can be achieved by individuals working alone.

- Collaboration with a professional colleague enhances the process of critical reflection.

Inhibiting Factors and Problematics.

On the other hand, this paper has sought to raise some problematics for your consideration:

- Doesn't the adoption of a critical stance inhibit some practitioners rather than emancipate them? Rather than freeing individuals, doesn't adoption of a critical stance simply lock us into another restrictive mind set?
- Collaborative action and reflection tend to be labour and time expensive.
- The adoption of a critical epistemology doesn't ensure that critical reflectivity will actually occur.
- Journal keeping can be a waste of time if issues are not faced directly and honestly.
- Practitioners' exposure of powerful institutional constraints can have a dampening effect on change.

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APPENDIX A: CASE STUDIES

In all of the following cases, care has been taken to mask the identity of the individual writers. With this assurance provided, all have given permission for their work to be used in this workshop and as a basis for further research.

(The actual case study material is available from the author of this paper and is not available on this disk version). The following is available if requested:

CASE STUDIES: MODULE 5A Researching Training Practices

"Georgina"

"Margaret"

"Gino"

"Mandy"

CASE STUDY : MODULE 5C Qualitative Methods for Trainers

"Lisa"

CASE STUDY: MODULE 5D Epistemology: Research and the Trainer

"Lisa"

CASE STUDIES: MODULE 5E Action Research

"Gino"

"Maree"

CASE STUDIES: MODULE 5G Collaboration and Collegiality

The following case studies are drawn from the final assignments of three trainers who completed Module G during the Autumn Semester, 1992. In each case, the writers have drawn upon the entries which were made in their professional journals as they completed the activities in the module.

Case Study A "Merle"

Merle is a trainer who works in a consultative role for a trade union group.

Case Study B "Brenda"

Merle works in the a regional branch office of DEET.

Case Study C "Peter"

Peter is an industry trainer working for a large manufacturing firm.