Adult Education Research Conference   1998 Conference Proceedings (San Antonio, TX)

Vital Work: Adult Development Within the Natural Workplace

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract: This phenomenological study explores meaning and experience within the natural workplace. The educative potential is revealed through the organizations' quest to nurture the human spirit at work and to create a more socially just work society. Findings illuminate conditions most conducive to growth and development within the context of work.

Introduction

Efforts to "reinvent" the corporation depict a struggle to establish a vision of work founded on a more clearly articulated set of humanistic values (Aktouf, 1992). Embedded within the ideas of continuous quality, learning organizations, and empowerment lies at least implicit understanding of the critical role of learning and the cultivation of human spirit, capacity, and development. Evidence suggests, however, that the status quo of power, control, division of labor, and division of profits is retained by what may be considered a false humanism (Aktouf, 1992; Block, 1997). The perception of participation is often orchestrated through rhetoric and new programs which suggest inspirational outcomes associated with corporate performance (Briskin, 1996). The very acts of learning and knowing are reduced to value-added strategies founded on the idea that people can be improved like other forms of physical capital (Dirkx & Deems, 1996). This ideology fosters a narrow and restrictive growth--a miseducative experience--in both the individual and the organization (Dewey, 1938; Welton, 1991).

The notion that people learn only what is designated by others is a pedagogical fallacy that is potentially damaging to the organization (Jarvis, 1992) as well as to the individual. Learning is intrinsic within the workplace and the experiences people have within this setting (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Perhaps lesser known than many of today's work reforms is a transpersonal or psychodynamic perspective of workplace development (e.g., Fox, 1994; Sinetar, 1987; Stein & Hollwitz, 1992). This perspective focuses on conducting work in a manner which promotes the growth and welfare of the individual as well as the larger society. Such workplaces show evidence of fundamentally different assumptions of human nature and appear to recognize the workplace as a primary site for adult development and the growth of the human spirit. This is a view reflected in a more natural experience of work--"natural" in the sense that it ceases to artificially create or manage an experience for others (Semler, 1993)--that appears to be more consistent with human nature. Work can and should be educative, cultivating environments for growth, expression, and connectedness. Within such organizations, the every-dayness of people's experience becomes a continuous context and source of learning and of self-knowledge.

Natural or more fully human workplaces remain, however, under-researched, and much of what exists emphasizes a *perception* of work, rather than on the *experience* of work. The purpose of this study was to explore how people experience and make meaning of the natural workplace, to further our understanding of the qualities and characteristics of such an

environment, and to investigate ways in which the natural workplace may provide an educative work experience, contributing to people's growth and development.

Research Design

Learning is not simply about the exchange or accumulation of facts and information. It is about our experience of the world (Dewey, 1938; Jarvis, 1992; Kincheloe, 1995). Because the essence of experience is meaning-making, this study was grounded in Husserl's (as in Moustakas, 1994; Sinha, 1969) concept of phenomenology. Twenty co-researchers participated in this study, coming from two work organizations which met the established criteria for a "natural" workplace. Both participating organizations are located in the midwest: one was a 25-person marketing organization, the other an 850-person manufacturing firm. The co-researchers included both exempt and non-exempt workers and represented a range of diversity in terms of age, length of employment within the organization, and educational levels achieved.

Data was collected and triangulated through the use of focus groups, in-depth unstructured individual interviews, follow-up meetings with the co-researchers, non-confidential documents, and informal site observation. Data collection and analysis followed the structures outlined by Moustakas (1994, pp. 84-119), consisting of an 8-step process of obtaining descriptions of people's experiences, the creation of meaning units based on experience, clustering these units into themes, synthesizing these themes, and constructing individual and composite textural and structural descriptions for all participants. From the analysis, a composite synthesis of the meanings and essences of experience was created, resulting in a universal description of the experience of natural or vital work. Participants assisted in negotiating the study's conclusions.

Findings

Findings reveal these workplaces as relatively unstructured, with open systems of communication, open door policies, the formation and reformation of work groups for functional work, high levels of personal autonomy, varied opportunities for friendship, and fluid work practices. Life is both hectic and draining for these participants, filled with conflict, ambiguity, uncertainty, and high emotion. It is an experience filled with contradiction and paradox: that which is draining becomes also a source for new energy and growth, where conflict and uncertainty provide sources for understanding and learning from others, and where high emotion is balanced by a sense of safety and security.

It is "vital," as one person described, containing the very substances of life, animation, and spirit. Participants presented their experience in terms of themes used to describe and structure the experience of work:

Being at work. The data reveal intense feelings associated with being at work within these workplaces, ranging from frightening to exhilarating. These feelings were typically attributed to the overall pace of work and the levels of energy necessary to accomplish both personal and organizational goals: "it's a roller-coaster," "a tornado," and "a 50-yard dash." Participants frequently described the outcomes of the intense energy and emotion in terms of pride in both personal and collective accomplishments, and a strong sense of being able to be more "real" or "authentic" at work.

Structures and processes. Typically, work structures and processes are minimal and somewhat vague, left largely to personal and group interpretation. There is little paperwork to support the processes, and participants were often uncertain as to specific work policies in place. Goals and expectations, both explicit and implicit, are originally defined by the company presidents but quickly become owned by individuals and work groups. A common fear among participants is that as the organizations continue to grow, increasing structure and formalized work processes may become necessary, replacing loose parameters with more rigid structure.

How work is conducted. Though some formal structures and processes are in place, work is actually conducted within the dynamics of work groups or teams which are both functional and specialized. Being a team is seen as less a configuration of individuals and more as an idea and attitude carried by people. Participation is not simply "allowed," but represents an approach to work that is cultivated throughout a person's tenure. Likewise, "empowerment" is not something given but a condition of human nature that is inherent in the individual and expressive of the human spirit. Central to how work is conducted is the idea of having fun, joking around, and the cultivation of informal relationships. The work done is enhanced and supported by recognizing contributions--being noticed, and noticing others. This is an aspect of caring for and needing others to be successful, and carries over into relationships with clients and customers as well.

Comparing and contrasting past work experiences. Examples from past work experiences included rigid and well-defined structures and processes that were seen to restrict and constrain them. Time clocks and rules were used to exemplify what constituted most business and corporate environments. The comparisons made were presented in terms of what was learned within the more traditional work experiences and included such things as not being trusted or valued, reduced self confidence, greater satisfaction with the status quo, and a deadening of any initial desire to go "above and beyond" what was asked of them.

Learning and knowing. Learning was presented as both intentional and unintentional, starting with the transition from a previous work or school experience to their present point in time. Intentional learning was typically self-directed in nature, and the organizations provide on-going opportunities for people to learn by, for example, access to

a corporate library, software, audiotapes, conferences, professional journals, and tuition assistance. The emphasis was with learning needs being identified by the individuals themselves. Outcomes of both intentional and unintentional learning were presented primarily in terms of changes in their self-perception and benefits to the organization.

<u>Trust and responsibility</u>. Perhaps the primary vehicle for accomplishing work tasks and developing a new sense of self rested with issues of trust and responsibility. Meeting the challenges this presented is difficult and viewed as something that is learned over time. Trust was often discussed in terms of symbols or workplace conditions which served as examples to them of being trusted, including such things as the lack of rigid rules governing their behavior, or leadership's encouragement of choice and autonomy. Increased trust and responsibility heightened people's sense of being accountable to others, and provided the basis for the paradoxical relationship between personal choice and working for the collective good. Only over time did people begin to also trust themselves, often having to un-learn behaviors and defenses necessary in earlier environments but which serve now as barriers to their effectiveness and growth.

<u>Leadership</u>. A wide range of leadership qualities were highlighted, primary of which was their sense of a leader "not being a manager." There is a very strong perception that, in spite of leaders' fast movements and busy days, leaders were noticing what people were doing, who was putting in extra effort, and what accomplishments were being made. Leaders verbalize what they observe and give frequent and spontaneous recognition for contributions made. Reward systems are both formal and informal, including profit sharing, verbal praise, and showcasing accomplishments in public ways.

<u>Dark side of work</u>. Participants' descriptions also included a dark side to working within these environments, and people expressed a great deal of frustration with having to deal with ambiguity, contradictions, and paradox. Personal conflicts with co-workers were identified by a majority of participants as being difficult to confront and resolve, and presented as a "down-side" to having close personal and social relationships at work.

<u>Meaning in Work.</u> According to these participants, work constitutes how they care for themselves and others--how they contribute to the world. Work means personal growth through the daily struggles and challenges, through expressive activity, and an ever-broadening perception of their presence in the world. It means the "thrill" and pride in "seeing something come from nothing," or in "pushing myself to do what I did not believe I could do." The experience of trust, responsibility, being connected with others, and recognition help to create meanings of value and of the awareness of one another's essential humanity. In instances where these have been absent in past work experiences, participants presented an overwhelming reliance on financial outcomes to define meaning within work. While the material rewards as a meaning for work remained for all participants, these dimmed as people engaged more closely with others in purposeful work.

Discussion

Central to Dewey's (1938) ideas of educative environments is the belief that participatory or democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience (p. 34) and are more likely to result in experiences which arouse curiosity and strengthen initiative--necessary conditions for the desire to go on learning. The natural workplace expresses its educative potential through interaction with others, structures and systems for communication which demand interpersonal competence and dialogue, and the encouragement of postformal thought through processes which compel a complex means of problem-solving. Even the conflicts inherent in this environment serve as a potential source for individual and collective growth as people are encouraged to move from self-protective behaviors to ever-increasing autonomy (Loevinger, 1980). The negative dimensions of work are balanced in part by ample opportunities for informal relationships; socialization, friendship, and fun provide opportunities to re-energize and rejuvenate from the complexities present within the workplace. Participants in this study indicated that interaction with others, and the nature of relationships which developed impacted not only the quality of the work produced but also their sense of self. Cognitive development accompanies increases in social-cognitive experience (e.g., Sinnott, 1993) as people become challenged to reflect on their beliefs or behaviors, to debate and dialogue, and to approach their work more critically. Increasingly complex ways of solving problems also develop with social experience at work and encourage critical and postformal thought (Mezirow, 1991; Sinnott, 1993).

The natural workplace depicts an organizational consciousness which values mindfulness--the active processing of information, differentiation, and awareness of context (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Langer, 1989). Langer (1989) proposes that human potential can be expanded through processes which demand an active rather than passive experience of work, cultivating individuals who continually create new challenges for themselves. Organizational goals are achieved in such a way that people are originators rather than pawns, and expressive creativity encourages innovation rather than conformity and satisfaction with the status quo. Organizational leaders play a key role in developing mindfulness--not by way of control and power but rather in terms of their careful attention toward what will be of most use to the workers. Findings suggest that by de-structuring work and through the manifest valuing of the whole person within the organization, the natural workplace removes the barriers placed by fragmented and alienating work which serve to restrict and distort growth.

Conclusion and Implications

Learning and knowing within the workplace are not aspects of work which *might* happen, but aspects of work which *do* happen. As persons concerned with both learning and work, this directs our attention to *what* is learned within the context of work--the developmental opportunities that are embedded within the ways we structure, organize, and conduct work. The findings within this study suggest that real and fundamental change within the workplace evolves not through the application of cosmetic changes but through dynamic and contradictory means; development is not a function of training but a way of

conducting work as a whole. This study reveals characteristics of educative work environments which return the person at work to that of a subject who acts upon his or her world, rather than an object to be acted upon. Such a workplace demands of people greater flexibility, the development of new skills, and a high tolerance for ambiguity. Fortunately, these environments provide opportunities for developing these qualities.

Reframing organizations as sites for adult development begins with critical assumptions concerning human nature: that people are active constructors, not pawns, within the workplace; that we carry in us an innate drive to create something larger than ourselves; and that we are naturally motivated and empowered. The findings of this study, together with anecdotal evidence, prior research and theory of the relationship between work and learning, suggest central principles for the cultivation of the natural workplace. While these principles are not necessarily exhaustive, they nevertheless guide the concrete ways in which educative work is structured and organized.

First, it is imperative that people within the workplace be seen as active and willing participants rather than as instruments of production. We must abandon management based on authority and in its place create opportunities which nurture people's desire to belong, to contribute, and to engage in meaningful work. Managers are not "artisans of liberation" (Aktouf, 1992); rather, a culture of convergence and sharing must be inserted into actual practice where people act on their intentions through reasons, feelings, and choices rather than by "causes."

Participatory and self-directing work processes provide the necessary opportunities for a more unitive life and growth through autonomy, relationship, and engagement with others. This participation, however, must remain unrestrained by channels of command and control mechanisms. Rather than simply a symbolic participation, people must participate in a real way with the sharing of profits, power, property, and decisions. The *perception alone* of autonomy, being valued, and participation will not sustain the more humanized workplace; as Aktouf describes (1992), it must be a lived rather than appropriated experience, one which holds the human actor in high regard in an authentic way.

It is critical that an organization become willing and able to reflect on itself, to critique and question its own work relations, and to cultivate a more mindful or conscious orientation to the full environment in which it operates. This more conscious and critical perspective provides the means for increasing both personal and collective capacity, to expand identity and embrace a larger view of ourselves in the world.

The fragmentation of work, the separation of the person from his or her expressive nature, the segmented control of information and knowledge, and alienation from each other, must cease. A greater sense of holism, of connectedness and interconnectedness, must be recognized as it pertains to the worker and the product, the person and the environment. The arena of work must be seen in its full complexity and multidimensional character. This includes the relation between language and work and the relationship between communication, information-sharing, and a person's ability to contribute in a meaningful

way. The person at work must not be separated from the symbols, meaning, society, emotions, and free will which constitute our humanity.

Finally, the purpose of work based strictly on economic assumptions must be challenged. Where more traditional workplaces and many workplace reforms focus on profit and consumption as primary goals, the natural workplace understands these as natural byproducts of a more humanized environment and as a means to contribute to a greater cause. Work is not simply about money but about satisfying our human need for self-expression, innovation, community, and purpose.

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