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Workplace Learning for International Humanitarian Assistance Corps

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Purpose of the Session

In the past decades, while global industrial progress has generally improved people's life, poverty, plague, and scarcity of resources are still major challenges for residents in many areas. Even in a modern society, catastrophe caused by a war or weather also often impacts its security and stability. In nations faced with such humanitarian challenges, many voluntary groups have been formed to assist hard-pressed governments in mitigating various crises. The purpose of this session is to discuss my current research project on workplace learning for those people who provide humanitarian assistance internationally.

Why it is Important

Although there is plenty of literature discussing training for volunteers, training for international voluntary workers is a relatively new area and has received limited attention. Since the 1980's, non-governmental organizations (NGO) for international humanitarian assistance significantly increased in number as people came to realize that it was not possible to rely solely on governments in dealing with international poverty or crises. However, while more people are devoting themselves to working in underdeveloped foreign lands, little research has been done on how to prepare these corps to work in a different culture and environment. Workplace learning for international assistance providers is critical because it does not merely help to improve service quality for local people; equally importantly, it can help these service-providers understand how to maintain safety, prevent accidents, and avoid cultural conflicts.

Questions and Issues

Since 2004, I have begun a study that focuses on workplace learning activities for NGO international corps. In this session, I will use my study as an example to discuss issues in four areas.

Research question: How should newly emerged research question be dealt with?

The main inquiry of this research project was how NGOs can systematically develop their staff for international assistance work. However, the scope of such an inquiry was later found to be too broad because how organizations design their learning activities depends on staff members' work assignment types and required competencies. Therefore, the original inquiry raised an even more fundamental question: What competence is required for NGO international humanitarian corps? To investigate the newly emerged question, I added a few interview items associated with workers' competencies and the methods they had used to obtain these competencies as I continued to search for possible strategies to handle this new question.

Theoretical Perspective: How should one go about finding an appropriate theoretical framework for a relatively new, interdisciplinary topic?

Since the beginning of the project, I have been searching for an appropriate theoretical framework for this study. I reviewed literature in the three related fields of volunteer development, expatriate training, and NGO history, and then selected “expatriate training” as the major perspective. Literature in expatriate training discussed training curriculum, program development, and support systems for international workers which seemed to mesh well with the original research questions. However, as the new research question emerged (as mentioned in the last paragraph), I needed another perspective more related to competency. After reviewing literature, I chose the concept of *cultural competence* to be the theoretical perspective for the question with respect to international corps’ competence.

Methods: What limitations could confront the researcher during data collection?

Two techniques, observation and interview, were utilized to obtain data in this study. I participated in Taiwanese NGOs’ activities, and conducted 60-120 minute interviews with people who have been involved in international assistance work. During the data collection process, this study faced two limitations. First, because this study involved people’s work in different countries, the difficulties in conducting direct observation increased. Second, some of these international NGO workers were volunteers and only showed up for special events, so the boundary of this target population was uncertain. To map possible research participants, I relied on NGOs’ networks of connections with this population.

Researcher’s role: How do researchers prepare themselves for a field study?

Participating in serving with those who work in underdeveloped areas can be physically and mentally challenging for a researcher. A few months ago, I participated in an NGO medical trip to central Taiwan after a typhoon disaster. During the trip, we sometimes got stuck on nasty roads and at other times barely had enough water for cooking and drinking. One night, when I was about to fall asleep, I overheard a conversation between two young nurses. One said to the other, “I am glad that in two more days I can go home.” As I lay in my sleeping bag staring at a bloodstain and the squashed body of an insect on the ground right next to my head, I asked myself, “How do you feel?” Such a participatory observation experience helped me to understand more deeply many humanitarian corps’ work environments on the frontline, and it also pushed me to reflect on the meaning of participant observation in one’s research. As researchers, when we step out onto the field, our participation means more than making a physical appearance; it involves the change of our mental status and the process of adapting to a different context. While researchers are viewed as research instruments in qualitative studies, issues related to researchers’ mental adaptation and preparation have not been addressed enough in the literature.