Adult Education Research Conference

2011 Conference Proceedings (Toronto, ON, Canada)

A Transformative Learning Perspective on Workplace Safety

R. Bruce Dodge
National-Louis University

A Transformative Learning Perspective on Workplace Safety

R. Bruce Dodge
National-Louis University

Abstract: Workplace injuries and illness are a problem of epidemic proportion yet safe workplaces can be created. Using the lens of transformative learning this case study, informed by ethnography, examined the experience of a long term seniors' living facility which had dramatically reduced injury rates and costs. The study sought to understand the apparent perspective transformation of senior leaders and how that change impacted the organization. Disorienting dilemmas, discourse and critical reflection were seen as contributing to a new frame of reference which guided the actions of leaders.

Workplace injuries, illness and fatalities are at epidemic proportions, yet often go unnoticed by society or are accepted as a cost of economic success. In Canada and the United States alone there are millions of disabling injuries, thousands of fatalities and billions of dollars in costs (Association of Workers' Compensation Boards of Canada, 2010; National Safety Council, 2008) attributed to workplace incidents annually - impacting not only the lives of the victims, but also their families, communities and workplaces. While these incidents are often euphemistically referred to as *accidents* most are both predictable and preventable. Safe workplaces do exist and serve as a beacon to those who wish to create a safe environment where people go home at the end of a day or a shift in the same condition as they arrived. It seems common sense that a workplace would do all that it can to prevent injury, yet injury rates suggest many workplaces have high rates of preventable injury.

As an education manager with the workplace safety and insurance system I saw the impact of not striving to create a safe work environment as directly linked to preventable injuries or death. This raised the question of why workers would choose not to work safely or managers choose not take steps to create a safe work environment and a culture that valued safety and people? This is the conundrum I faced as an educator and injury prevention researcher. The genesis of my research was based in the nagging questions of why some workplaces could accept high injury rates, and what caused workplaces to decide to take action to reduce injury?

In seeking to understand this phenomenon I recognized the pivotal role that senior leaders hold in directing workplaces through defining workplace priorities, defining policy, allocating resources and setting the tone in the workplace. In addition, the actions of managers provide insight to employees relative to priorities held by leaders. How managers respond to events becomes interpreted as what is important in the workplace by workers engaged in an ongoing process of meaning making (Zohar & Luria, 2004). Peterson and Smith (2000) contend senior leaders have the ability to shape and evoke meaning in the workplace. If we accept the influence of senior leaders on their organizations and Mezirow's (2000) contention that our actions are guided by what he refers to as our *frame of reference* then the unquestioned assumptions, beliefs and

expectations of senior leaders – their frame of reference can be seen as instrumental in defining the workplace culture and the level of importance safety will enjoy in the workplace.

Defining the Study

Understanding the changes to an organization appeared to require a deeper understanding of what was going on in organizations that fundamentally changed their perspective on workplace safety, and specifically the perspectives of senior leaders. My focus on "insight, discovery and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing"(Merriam, 1998, p. 28) suggested a qualitative approach for my study and more specifically a case study approach with clearly defined boundaries established by the organizational context. Given that understanding the culture of the workplace and the place safety held within that culture was critical to understanding the change, my approach to the research was further influenced by ethnography —"the art and science of describing a group or culture" (Fetterman, 1998, p. 1). While not an ethnographic study *per se*, ethnographic approaches to data gathering and interpretation as described by Wolcott (1994) were used in the study.

In determining an appropriate site for the study I looked for a workplace that had moved from high injury rates and associated costs to a focus on safety with significant reductions in injuries and costs. My role and contacts as a manager within the workplace safety and insurance system led me to a residential seniors' living facility I called Cloverloch, and its parent organization which I referred to as Compassionistic Inc. Cloverloch had a record of high injury rates relative to similar organizations within the already high injury health care sector, followed by a dramatic turnaround. In a 4 year period lost time injuries were reduced by almost 50% and injury related costs were reduced by 82%. Agreement was sought and granted to undertake a study with Compassionistic Inc. with a focus on Cloverloch.

To gain an understanding of what had happened, interviews were held with 9 leaders and managers at Compassionistic Inc. and Cloverloch and one non-management person. A variety of written documents were reviewed including their safety policy and program, strategic plan, and safety committee meeting minutes. In addition, analysis of artefacts such as equipment and safety promotional posters and bulletin boards was completed. On-site observations were also conducted on an operational floor and I attended safety committee meetings and a management meeting at Cloverloch. Extensive field notes were kept and these, along with the interview transcripts, and written documents were analyzed and coded to identify themes and gain an understanding of how things worked relative to the change within the organization.

Change through the Lens of Transformative Learning

To guide my understanding and interpretation I looked to transformative learning as a theoretical frame or lens through which to view and interpret data. Mezirow (1978, 1991, 2000) contends that making meaning can be understood as a learning process in which we struggle to negotiate contested meanings in a constructed reality. Learning can be understood as using prior interpretations to create revised interpretations of our

experience to guide future action. In his view, our assumptions, beliefs and expectations constitute a frame of reference which acts as a filter shaping and delimiting our perception and predisposing our intentions and expectations. Through critical reflection and reflective discourse with others, learners can come to examine their frames of reference with the potential of changing or transforming problematic frames of reference, making them more dependable and generating opinions and interpretations that are more justified. He contends the process may be focused and mindful, or reflect mindless assimilation; it may epochal or incremental.

Transformative learning theory provided a way of understanding workplace safety and issues such as the inaction of leaders to address high injury rates despite a positive and caring attitude toward employees. Mezirow (2000) defines a frame of reference as a structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter experiences. It provides the context for meaning making and how we see ourselves and our role in the world. Where a leader's frame of reference coincides with cultural and organizational norms there is little to cause her to question her assumptions, beliefs and expectations or the actions that naturally flow from them. Unexamined assumptions may be distorted, yet they may remain outside of our awareness providing the reference points that guide our actions. Hegemonic assumptions as described by Brookfield (2000) reflect the taken for granted, unquestioned, accepted ways of seeing things. In the case of workplace safety, hegemonic assumptions such as the inevitability of *accidents*, acceptance of high injury rates as normal or simply not recognizing workplace safety as an issue can be seen as guiding action that may well disadvantage the safety of employees. Coming to recognize one's own assumptions and critically reflecting upon them, and engaging in reflective discourse with others holds the potential for transforming problematic frames of reference, in this case regarding workplace safety.

In the case of Compassionistic Inc. and Cloverloch safety had always been a concern, yet it was not a top priority. It was not perceived by managers as being of high importance to senior leaders. During the period of high injury rates leader's frames of reference reflected a sense that they were doing OK regarding safety; that safety was being managed and a safety program was in place; and a belief that they were on par with others in their industry sector. Injuries were accepted as endemic to the work - a part of their expectations. From the perspective of managers looking back at that time, safety simply "wasn't at the forefront of the organization." The injury rate was "just accepted, or people were complacent" it was "just the way things are." There was a sense that "people were getting kind of lax" relative to safety and employees felt safety was simply a management issue, that where there was a hazard "they [management] should fix that." Taken together these perspectives reflect a collective frame of reference, one held by senior leaders, managers and employees that served to guide the way people thought about safety, if they did at all. Actions were based in this frame of reference that served as a set of reference points for what individual managers and employees should do and how they should do it. Injury rates went largely unexamined and were accepted as normal within the prevailing frame of reference.

Disorienting Dilemmas, Discourse and Critical Reflection

Transformative Learning Theory can be seen as providing a roadmap for understanding the process of change at Compassionistic Inc. and Cloverloch beginning with new frames of reference among senior leaders and cascading down through the organization in an ongoing learning process of meaning making. As Mezirow (1991, 2000) describes it, learning can be seen as occurring when we critically assess our taken-for-granted frames of reference, come to a new perspective and take action on that new perspective. The learning may be intentional, incidental or mindlessly assimilative, setting out to learn or change perspectives is not a prerequisite. Three key elements of transformative learning: a disorienting dilemma, discourse and critical reflection, provide a way of understanding the changing perspectives of senior leaders, i.e. coming to a new or transformed frame of reference which in turn precipated change within the organization. Within transformative learning theory, change comes about when a learner critically examines their assumptions, beliefs and expectations. In most cases there is a precipitating event or occurrence - a disorienting dilemma which leads the individual to question their assumptions and beliefs which leads to perspective transformation (Taylor, 2000). While this may be a significant personal event, Cranton (2010) holds that encountering a perspective at odds with the prevailing perspective may also lead to an examination of previously held beliefs, values and assumptions.

In the case of Compassionistic Inc. and Cloverloch, there were two somewhat parallel events or disorienting dilemmas that can be seen as leading to a questioning of previously held perspectives. At the corporate level a program review exercise served to highlight high levels of injury and cost associated with workplace injury. In addition a rise in injuries was experienced despite a move to new facilities designed specifically for senior living which was expected to lead to a reduction in injuries. At Cloverloch a presentation by the workers' compensation board on their high rates of injury in comparison to their industry sector served to cause leaders and safety committee members to question their assumptions relative to workplace safety within the organizational context. As one manager put it "we were safety leaders…in a way we didn't want to be." In the face of compelling contrary evidence, prevailing assumptions, beliefs and expectation regarding workplace safety began to be questioned and critically examined. It was no longer possible to sustain previous perspectives.

Having encountered a perspective that challenged their prior assumptions relative to safety and their performance, the leadership team appeared to have initiated a process that could be understood as critical reflection on what Mezirow (2000) refers to as content, process and premise, and to engage in critical discourse. They examined their existing safety program and initiatives – the content; how they managed and delivered the safety program and represented safety as leaders – the process; and how they thought about safety, their philosophy and the way it was represented within the organization – the premise. These elements were found to be inadequate further contributing to transformative learning. Discourse among the leaders and with trusted colleagues further emphasized the need to make safety a priority. As Charles, one of the managers tasked with leading the change put it, when the CEO realized that to be the best, safety has to be a focus – "I think that switch, that change, that thought process was kind of the snapping

of the finger if you will or the flipping of the switch." A new perspective at the top of the organization was seen as initiating a broad change across the organization.

Needlessly injuring people was very much at odds with deeply held organizational values which flowed from the organizational patriarch and founder who, as the CEO pointed out "cares deeply about people." The new perspectives held by the leadership team with the CEO seen as a catalyst, began to impact the organization and the place of safety within their operation. Having built and equipped a new building specifically for the purpose of senior living there were, as the CEO put it "no excuses for poor safety records." New members of the leadership team were also able to "bring a new way of looking at things to the table" suggestive of reflective discourse amongst members of the team. Acceptance or lack of awareness of high injury rates and complacency reflective of prior assumptions was replaced with a determination to become a safety leader in an organization where injuries were not acceptable and people focused on safety and worked collaboratively to reduce injury – a distinctly new frame of reference.

Impacting the Organization

This new perspective appeared to have emerged both at the corporate level and among senior leaders at Cloverloch. At the corporate level changes to the frames of reference of leaders can be seen as contributing to actions such as establishing safety as a strategic priority, changes to safety policies and programs and hiring of a safety champion. The importance of the CEO's perspective on safety cannot be overstated in understanding the change that came to Cloverloch. His personal commitment and engagement with staff established the credibility of the new priority for safety. At the facility level the answer to who decided to make safety a priority was clear. As one manager put it "I would say it would be our CEO." The CEO's engaged and visible role provided not only leadership for the change, but for any who didn't see safety as an important part of their work, it may have provided something of a disorienting dilemma. As one vice president put it "when he is up there talking about how important safety is to him, they know he means it." This new perspective shared by the senior leadership team was welcomed by managers at Cloverloch who became engaged in the process and as one manager at Cloverloch put it "being directly involved changed me." Actions by managers at Cloverloch such as increased safety training and safety promotional programs both reflected the new frame of reference and demonstrated a commitment to safety.

The greatest change however was the cascading down of a new perspective on safety seen as initiated by the CEO. Not only did safety become recognized as one of the corporate pillars of success reflected in the strategic plan, but with the active participation of senior leaders, engagement sessions were held with staff. These engagement sessions which could be seen as creating the conditions for transformative learning saw leaders and managers consulting with employees to address the reality of their current status relative to workplace injury, engaging in discourse with employees, critically reflecting on the priority and processes associated with workplace safety and collaboratively seeking solutions. Through engaging employees safety truly became a priority reflecting a new way of thinking about work and their roles – a new frame of reference. Manager's actions also reflected this new perspective where safety was a priority further embedding

safety within the culture through the on-going learning process of meaning making. Employees assumed greater responsibility for creating a safe workplace and contributed to innovative solutions to problems. Creation of new programs for high risk residents were seen as a result of the new perspective on safety resulting in a 50% reduction in injuries for employees working with the group.

Conclusion

Transformative learning can be seen as a powerful approach to change within the workplace. Whether incidental or more intentionally driven, changing frames of reference as they relate to a field such as safety within an organizational context can be seen to contribute to fundamental change in how people think about the issue and respond to it. Disorienting dilemmas, discourse and critical reflection can be seen as creating the potential for transformative learning among leaders with the capacity to alter organizational strategy and priorities, and also among individual employees impacting their actions, in this case relative to workplace safety. As collective frames of reference are changed, the transformed perspective begins to become the collective norm, reflected and embedded in the workplace culture. It becomes *the way we do things around here*, and when that relates to efforts at creation of a safe workplace by managers and a sense of permission and commitment to work safely by employees the potential exists for injuries to be dramatically reduced as happened at Cloverloch.

References

Association of Workers' Compensation Boards of Canada (2010). 2008 key statistical measures Retrieved 22 June, 2010, from http://www.awcbc.org/common/assets/ksms/2008ksms.pdf

Brookfield, S. D. (2000). Transformative learning as ideology critique. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation : Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 125-148). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cranton, P. (2010). Spiraling into transformative learning. *International journal of adult vocational education and technology, 1*(1), 1-13.

Fetterman, D. M. (1998). *Ethnography : step by step* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education, 28*(2), 100-110.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 3-33). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

National Safety Council (2008). *Injury facts* (CD-ROM). Itasca.

Peterson, M. F., & Smith, P. B. (2000). Sources of meaning, organizations, and culture: Making sense of organizational events. In N. M. Ashkanasy, C. P. Wilderom &

M. F. Peterson (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational culture & climate* (pp. 101 - 115). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Taylor, E. W. (2000). Analysing research on transformative learning theory. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 285-328). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Wolcott, H. F. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data: Description, analysis and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Zohar, D., & Luria, G. (2004). Climate as a social-cognitive construction of supervisory safety practices: Scripts as proxy of behavior patterns. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 89*(2), 322-333.