ADAPT AND OVERCOME: EVERYDAY LEARNING IN THE ADF

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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns fifteen Australian Defence Force (ADF) workers. We argue that these ADF workers are constantly confronting change as they negotiate workplace learning. Using a grounded theory approach analysing semi-structured interviews, a prime concern identified for respondents was finding their place and becoming members of a community of practice.

KEYWORDS

workplace learning – community of practice – informal learning

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the 21st century there has been considerable change in the workplace and workplace practices. In this paper we share our research focusing on how a particular group of Australian Defence Force (ADF) workers perceive their experiences of transitioning to a new work role involving a change of geographical location. The purpose of the research was to gain an insight into how these particular workers manage their continual change in workplaces as part of their lifelong learning in the military. We wanted to know how they learnt to ‘fit in’ to a community of practice, enabling us to then reflect on the success of a specific community of practice.

In a military workplace context there are various factors present that are not present in more mainstream workplaces; such as potential transfer to armed conflict, security issues, regular posting cycles and the performance of military rank, thus constructing a unique environment called the ADF workplace. In this research we have focused on WASP (pseudonym), a sub-unit of the larger ADF workplace, which is a military establishment comprising a high security environment with state-of-the-art technology. We would argue that these factors, plus others, influence how these particular workers learn to ‘fit into’ this workplace.

Our respondents undertake formal learning in the workplace as a part of Competency Based Training (CBT) programs. These competencies assist workers to develop workplace capacity. After completing their courses, the respondents were assigned to an operational crew working shift-work. This shift-work routine consists of four 12-hour working days, made up of two early shifts and two late shifts, followed by four days off. This routine repeats itself to make up one WASP shift-work cycle. The working day is broken up into the following activities: conducting operations that required intense concentration; periods of resting from these operational periods; military like duties such as physical training and weapons handling; general administration, and attention to personal medical/dental needs.

In addition, we argue that these participants undertake informal learning as a part of the everyday workplace activity in order to ‘fit into’ this workplace. It can also be argued that informal learning at the workplace is part and parcel of the ordinary texture of workplace activity and has a holistic character, appearing to be a seamless experience embedded in the activity of the workplace (McIntyre, 2000; Hager, 1999). Therefore it is not easy to separate out informal learning however in this research we attempt to separate informal from formal learning by exploring the lived experiences of the workers. By exploring the lived experience we can gain an insight into how these particular workers see themselves as lifelong learners in a changing workplace and what they do to become members of a particular community of practice. Our research question asks “How do a group of ADF workers become members of a successful community of practice when they are subject to multiple postings? We contend that within the socio-cultural context, informal learning plays a vital role in the construction and transformation of identity that subsequently enables the worker to find ‘their place’ in that community. This has implications for how the ADF worker frames their future deployment readiness – a state of combat preparedness and participates in the day-to-day activities of the workplace.

THEORETICAL FRAMING: LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE

Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning is an integral part of human activity mediated by the socio-cultural context of the workplace in which it occurs. This socio-cultural dimension presents knowledge, not as an unarguable fact, but rather as something continually changing as...
people confront or negotiate new situations and activities enriching what they already know (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). During this negotiation individuals can move from novice to master in a community of practice learning through situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). According to Clancey (1995) situated learning involves the dynamic construction of information as it happens to us through talk and action. Chappell (2002) suggests that this view demonstrates a shift from seeing information as content and learning as acquisition of information to the active construction of meaning by learners situated within reality. Therefore knowledge can be seen as a complex, fluid mix that is somehow formally structured, tacit and difficult to frame completely in logical terms (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). As well as describing knowledge as tacit and explicit, Eraut (2004) breaks knowledge into three parts: codified, cultural, and personal knowledge. Codified knowledge is knowledge that is embedded in texts, databases, correspondence, work instructions, manuals, and so forth, whereas cultural knowledge is socially centred. Cultural knowledge allows people to understand how to act, here, at this particular workplace.

Wenger (1998) considers learning through participation in a community of practice encompasses the construction of identity and belonging in a socio-cultural context. Wenger (1998) considers that participants are on a trajectory of participation that is unique to the individual and mediated by the forces and tensions associated with the individuals interacting with others and the workplace environment. Boud and Garrick (1999) assert that individuals undertake learning at work for two main purposes: the first is to contribute to organisational performance and the second is for more personal development. Expanding on this notion, Billett (2004, p. 321) asserts that workplaces, as a context for learning, need to be seen as more than "physical and social environments; they need to be understood as something negotiated and constructed through interdependent processes of affordance and engagement.” What this means for this paper is that we can argue contemporary research about workplace learning has produced a shift in thinking about knowledge as something tangible to a more complex view of knowledge existing "within people, part and parcel of human complexity and unpredictability” (Davenport & Prusak, 1998, p. 5). This draws attention to the role of informal learning as a social and cultural activity shaping and being shaped by the context of that environment.

METHODOLOGY

Fifteen respondents participated in semi-structured interviews of 45-60 minutes each during their first week at WASP, then again three months later. All respondents successfully completed a formal CBT course between the interviews. Using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1989) interview data was initially coded and categorized under emerging themes.

An initial theme was required to come to this posting that allowed us to start from the position that all respondents were required to come to this workplace but all came for differing reasons. Our use of the code required has enabled us to establish that respondents arrive as individuals with a multiplicity of differences making up their subjectivities (Hills, 1998). This demonstrates that although these workers work within a rigid organisational structure with prescribed performances, there is fluidity of subjectivity as they negotiate their workplace and their work roles. Two other major codes were touring and sexy work that indicated reasons for pursuing this particular new posting and demonstrated to us reasons for why our respondents wanted to make this posting successful.

Data was coded under the heading of touring when respondents indicated that they either joined the ADF to experience new things or had decided to move within the ADF to experience new things. Dave commented that although he had not expressed a wish to come to Adelaide he was going to make the most of his time in Adelaide. Likewise Arthur and Craig saw postings as a routine part of their work, as well as seeing other opportunities open up because of these postings. Therefore there is an underlying motivation to make the posting ‘successful’ during their tenure at WASP. There was also an attraction associated with the type of work undertaken at this site. There was something sexy about being at WASP that was solely due to the nature of the work performed.

The code sexy work referred to WASP as a preferred place to work. Respondents showed interest in the technology of the systems in the new workplace, that the work is valuable and directly contributes to the security of the Australian people. For example, Arthur, Dominic and Bill all wanted to come to WASP because of its internal reputation as a desired place to work. The complex electronic systems are novel and unique in Australia. This added attraction is another reason why these workers wanted to ‘fit in’ as this desirability can be connected to their identities as workers in this
context and possibly the gaining of a certain kind of status within the larger ADF. These three initial codes provided evidence of a strong incentive among individual respondents to make this posting ‘work’; this meant there was an underlying desire to ‘fit into’ the new role and workplace and established a starting point for us to determine how they then went on to facilitate this act of ‘fitting in’.

By drawing on such concepts as communities of practice and workplace learning we argue that through participation and engaging with both internal and external discourses the WASP team learn how to ‘fit in’ with the requirements of each new workplace that they encounter and still maintain a military readiness for potential and future deployment.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Lifelong learning can be seen as a site of competing discourses (Danaher, 2006) as can the military workplace. On the one hand ADF workers perform specific military rank and associated roles and on the other these same workers are positioned by those mechanisms. These we refer to as internal discourses. There are also external discourses that include postings and security processes that define how these workers engage with the workplace. Similar to other workplaces ADF workers are in constant movement across job roles, responsibilities and geographical location. In mainstream workplaces this is called “transfer” however in the military workplace this is called “posting” with constraints that make this concept slightly different to “transfer”. In the ADF, “posting” is characterized by limited tenures in any geographical locality, are mandated and involve promotion. When a person is promoted it is highly likely to involve a change of not only geographic location but also include a change of job role and responsibilities. Consequently the ADF workforce can be seen to be in constant flux resulting in an incremental and complete changeover of staff every three to four years. An added dimension is the mandated security processes and procedures associated with WASP. ADF workers come under the Commonwealth Secrecy Act and therefore must adhere to specific security practices and procedures. Both internal and external discourses influence the ways in which people engage with and perform in the workplace.

We argue that respondents learn how to perform as ADF workers of a particular military rank and work role because of the nature of postings and the expectations of military life. This signals how the respondents have internalised both codified and cultural knowledge of the particular workplace (Eraut, 2004). Once the ADF worker learns the expectations of military life and where they fit according to rank in the broader ADF workplace, they can use this knowledge to adapt and become members of a smaller localized community of practice. This shows the development of what Eraut (2004) refers to as personal knowledge. Using these three types of knowledge then enables the worker to interact within the workplace.

Useful here is the concept of performativity (Butler, 1990; Braidotti, 1994) that allows us to explain the interaction within the workplace through discursive construction of military rank and deployment readiness. The performance of military rank is actively constructed by the respondents through positioning themselves and also being positioned (Harre, 2004). Rank is worn in a similar manner to military uniforms as indicated by the following example: Arthur reported that a colleague, who was sitting at his desk, answered the phone. On answering the phone he stood to attention when he realised that he was speaking to a high ranking ADF officer. While amusing for staff in the vicinity, this performance highlighted that military rank is a state of mind and the performance of repeated acts, norms and gestures that constitute ‘the allusion of an abiding’ person of a particular military rank (Butler, 1990).

**Adapt and overcome: Finding one’s place**

From our data we determined that most of the respondents viewed themselves as being part of a close-knit team work-wise, thus making up what Wenger (1998) described as a formal work group or community of practice. The respondents also reported a sense of identity and feeling of belonging to a particular group and that they enjoyed being a part of the workgroup. They reported a sense of camaraderie, collaboration, and looking out for the well-being of each other. Part of this sense of belonging and looking out for each other can be seen as a way of contributing to the organizational performance of the unit. This cohesion also allows for personal development as individual group members learn to work together in a successful team. As Boud and Garrick (1999) suggest these two purposes underpin learning at work and can be seen as a signal of successful team building.

Because of this closeness a sense of camaraderie developed among the 15 respondents and because of the type of workplace context, coupled with the internal and external discourses impacting on this workplace, it can be argued that in forming this work based team we see...
these workers as becoming a localized community of practice. That is, a localized community of practice – WASP - within a broader community of practice called the ADF. These respondents already know how to function within the broader military workplace and understand the expectations of the ADF. However these respondents were still required to learn new job activities (moving from novice to master) in an environment where everyone was new to the specific workplace (forming a new work team).

Because our respondents are continually confronted with change in their workplace environment they cannot rely on habituated responses. This is because they are interacting across multiple sites as ADF workers with other ADF workers. They are expected to come and go from their regular workplace to maintain “deployment readiness” doing such activities as small arms handling, parades and fitness training. Therefore they inhabit spaces within and beyond their assigned workplace and are interacting with more than just their immediate community of practice. We would therefore argue that these particular workers are in a constant state of change and are continuously finding their place within these required activities or expectations. Their place is not a “destination or final location; rather it is a ceaseless process where one continues to become” (Hills, 1998, P. 134). In engaging with continual change these workers are learning their place within WASP and also within the larger ADF organization. Their place is a concept used to articulate the relationship between the individual, the social, and the forces and tensions that exist in the workplace (Wenger, 1998). Their place also indicates a space where these respondents negotiate multiple discourses that construct their identities as workers, as soldiers, as parents, sons and daughters, thus highlighting multiple subjectivities (Moore, 2003). This negotiation takes place within a constantly changing environment where organizational discourses re-inscribe discourses and performances of military rank and procedure. These workers also negotiate ‘deployment readiness’ at the broader ADF level and ‘WASP development’ or postings at the local level, establishing multiple interactions across and among levels of the ADF organization. The perceptions of the fifteen respondents demonstrated the ways in which each person individually negotiates their multiple subjectivities and competing discourses within a specific organization through informal learning (Moore, 2003).

**Implications**

Through the ubiquitous workplace discourse about postings and constant reflections of postings – either about to be posted or having just been posted – our respondents are in a continual state of change or transformation. This migratory discourse includes stories of the past, reflection about the present posting, and the framing of future moves. This discursive terrain is caused by the nature of the context precipitated by ADF staff being in a constant state of “deployment readiness”. This demonstrates the way in which this community of practice can be seen as more than just the social and physical environment but rather a space that is constructed through a particular kind of engagement (Billet, 2004). In other words if the worker is not required to be deployed to armed conflict they are nevertheless still kept in readiness for yet another posting thus focusing on the migratory nature of the ADF employment, both in the subjective realm and in framing the future of the worker’s next position. So here we have a situation where workers are moving in and out of workplaces in order to maintain a military readiness role, moving in and out of the workplace to conform to military posting cycles, plus doing the usual day-to-day workplace activities of various ADF units, highlighting what Wenger (1998) refers to as a trajectory of participation. This has implications for how teamwork is maintained in an environment of constant change and how this change is managed within the broader ADF. This also has implications for how the military hierarchy support their staff in and between postings.

**CONCLUSION**

The notion of respondents finding their place at WASP is an essential characteristic of being the ‘good’ ADF worker. The ADF worker learns how to ‘fit in’ through informal learning from knowing the expectations, routines and performances that take place in and of the ADF workplace through localized communities of practice. Knowing ‘how’ to fit in comes from being part of the larger ADF workplace while finding their place comes from learning how survive as part of ‘deployment readiness’. Moreover, it can be concluded that the respondents’ prime concern was to find their place at this ADF workplace during current postings in order to not only maintain a state of readiness but also to exercise control over the nature and quality of their life (Bandura, 2001).

**REFERENCES**


