WORKPLACE LEARNING IN SMEs IN SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED AREAS.

Contribution to symposium on *Lifelong Learning and Social Justice: macro, micro and meso perspectives*

British Educational Research Association Conference, London Institute of Education, 6-8 September 2007

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INTRODUCTION

I will discuss some of the findings from the first phase of a European funded project investigating the dynamics between organisational and individual learning and training within the workplace and the relationship with learning communities outside the workplace. The aim of the research was to define the organisational learning culture and establish how the organisational learning culture affects individual learning within the organisation and to investigate to what extent the organisational learning culture allows for knowledge transfer between different communities of practice. I will review current research in the area of organisational learning, and then present two real-life examples of organisational learning in SMEs in Scotland.

THEORIES OF ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

In this analysis I focused on the distinction made by Easterby-Smith and Arajou (1999) between technical and social processes of individual learning within organisations. The technical processes are characterised by explicit information and effective processing. Argyris and Schön (1974) argue that learning involves the detection and correction of error. Problems an organisation encounter can be corrected by alteration of current action strategies. This is referred to as single-loop learning. Alternatively, the organisation can seek to look at the root of the problem and question and possibly alterate the governing variables and develop action strategies according to a new set of values and goals. This is referred to as double-loop learning and is a deeper approach to organisational learning. Double-loop learning is considered more flexible and active than single-loop learning.

The social approaches to learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) argue that learning is a social activity and emphasise the importance of the team in order for learning to occur. They hold further that people are members of communities of practice. Learning occurs as members move from a "newcomer" to an "oldtimer" through the process of legitimate peripheral participation. It has been argued that learning depends on interactions between members of staff in a workplace, so called learning affordances (Billett, 2001).The team is essential for effective learning, traditional hierarchical cultures however are considered anti-learning and anti-training, and undermine the ability of organisations to match and survive increasing competition in the global marketplace (Jones, 1996). Recently a focus has been placed on bringing intuition and reflective thinking into organisational learning; triple-loop or "third way" learning.

Unwin and Fuller (2004) developed an expansive-restrictive framework of organisational learning. Expansive characteristics include opportunities to engage in multiple, and overlapping, communities of practice at and beyond the workplace integrating personal and organizational development. The progress from "newcomer" to competent employee depends on the extent to which their participation is facilitated by experts. They applied the metaphor "learning territory" to describe the total exposure of learning opportunities the individual has including off-the-job learning and learning at home.

METHODOLOGY

Design

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant that provided in-depth and detailed data and allowed a flexibility that enabled the interviewees to associate freely around the answers. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed and analysed. Participation was entirely voluntary and care was taken to ensure complete confidentiality.

Participants

A manager and members of staff were interviewed at two SMEs in socially deprived areas in the west of Scotland; one manufacturing company (n=5) and one care home (n=5). The nursing home formed part of an organisation that was established fifteen years ago and consists of three nursing homes; each run as an individual business by its manager. The nursing home has 47 members of staff of whom 30 work full-time and 17 part-time. The manufacturing company is a well established international company that has been on this site about 20-30 years. This manufacturing site is one of four distributed all over the world and has around 180 employees. In total all staff interviewees were female apart from two care assistants who were male. These two companies were selected since they are of equivalent size and organisational structure, and were located in similar areas but represent two different sectors.

FINDINGS

The nursing home mainly provides its services to the local authority. Despite offering relatively low pay, the company has had a low staff turnover. The matron is aware that other homes have not been as lucky and believes that staff development is a good way of encouraging members of staff to stay with the company. Legislation ensures standards of care, e.g. Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001, and due to the importance of personal characteristics of the employees, the matron is willing to develop employees that are prepared to work at the company:

> I think that's creating the environment within the home that's some sort of learning.. that learning is good for you and we all do learn, and I hope [to, eds] teach by example, and we all learn from each other and just because I am manager it doesn't mean to say I know more than everybody else does, you know we all have something to offer and it's not just about the care staff, it's about the other staff as well. (Manager-care home-female)

Despite emphasising the importance of staff training, the matron holds that there are associated challenges. Firstly the difficulty in releasing staff to participate in training and secondly, finding information about development opportunities. However, most learning takes place in the workplace and can be referred to as "incidental" depending on the member of staff paying attention to details of the work carried out by more experienced members of staff (Lee et al, 2007).

The manufacturing company has a good reputation and with a constant pool of potential employees, recruitment of staff is not a difficulty the company faces. However, initial staff training can take up to six months and retaining a low staff turnover is a priority. A manufacturing company has not the same legislative pressure to ensure the basic training of staff as the care home and this is evident in the level of training offered to employees. The manager expresses a concern that members of staff fail to appreciate the financial pressure from more cost effective production areas and do not participate in the development of the company. He highlights that this is the first unionised company he has worked at and suggests that this is the underlying reason for the apparent tension between the management and employees.

Organisational learning culture

The interviewees at the care home are involved with various caring aspects of the elderly. They enjoy their job emphasising mainly social and emotional rewards, not only from caring about the residents but also their families.

All employees argue that they have developed in their working roles since joining the care home, both by improving their ability to perform, but also by having a greater understanding of, their job. They all

feel they are given opportunities to develop within the company, e.g. through training courses and the SVQs they have all achieved since joining the company. Additionally, the staff nurse has participated in regular prep courses. One care assistant argues that he has learned more skills at the company than anticipated such as taking people's pulses, a course requirement for the SVQ. Generally, women appear to have a greater awareness of informal learning opportunities and argue that members of staff are encouraged to learn both through courses but also informally by watching and imitating colleagues. One interviewee emphasises that being encouraged to take on more responsibilities led to a developed interest in tasks she was overtly opposing when still at school, e.g. administrative tasks. However, the matron emphasises the importance of respecting people's choices when it comes to learning and training. It is important, she argues, not to force training upon people if they do not want to commit and to respect that some members of staff are not interested in taking on further responsibility.

Employees at the care home describe a company learning culture with a readiness to afford opportunities for individuals to participate in learning activities. In line with Billett's (2001) theory of workplace learning affordances there seems to be a reciprocal sharing of knowledge between senior and junior members of staff. Members of staff are encouraged to pass acquired knowledge and experience onto each other, additionally one interviewee points out that the knowledge held by the junior members of staff is valued by senior members of staff who often ask their advice since junior members of staff spend more time with the residents. Similarly, she recognises that informally acquired knowledge might sometimes offer a more appropriate solution to a problem than the official "manoeuvre".

The operators at the manufacturing company circulate between various processes of the production line. Since the interviewees joined the factory the technology has changed. From mainly building and repairing products, many operators now test hearing aids on PCs. The manufacturing company has two full-time in-house training instructors to help them with these changes and occasionally external trainers are brought in. The management actively discourages informal learning in the workplace. There is a focus on techniques and making these more efficient that suggests single-loop learning and inhibiting of double-loop learning (Schön and Argyris, 1974; Agyris et al's, 1985). Training that is offered is short-term and goal focused and is considered part of work requirements, members of staff have therefore no choice whether to participate. There seems to be a lack of dialogue; the manager's fear of unionisation and the employees' lack of choice in participating in learning and training activities indicate unilateral control of the environment and deeply defensive routines. Contrary to the care home, a polarisation between management and employees occurs in the factory and rather than referring to the work team as "a family" there is a use of "us and them" terminology:

> Because of the type of work that it was maybe one girl would take a lot of short cuts. So that wasn't allowed so they preferred you to go by the book sort of thing. So that is why they prefer you to…
> (Operator-manufacturing company-female)

Knowledge transfer does not appear to occur at the manufacturing company where none of the interviewees felt they had had an opportunity to apply prior knowledge in their job. Neither do they seem to have clear identities as learners and did not feel that the company provided development opportunities. These are characteristics of a restrictive learning framework (Unwin and Fuller, 2004). However, some employees were hoping that the training offered at the company would enable them to move into a different field of work, e.g. childcare. Wenger (1998) holds that a separation between lives within and outside the workplace brings employees together as it strengthens the community wanting to be away from work. It is argued that training that promotes procedural compliance does not require understanding. The job is rather telling employees about their position within the company and the expectations invested in their relations to their work. In the manufacturing company, employees have chosen to find their own solutions to everyday situations in order to make sense of their working life. Despite being aware of the formal company policy, it is apparent that informal social learning occurs:

One of the ladies that came into the room there, .. I said 'well do you want me to show you how to do this because I have done loads and loads of them. I'll show you how to do this.' I'll be going away shortly anyway so I showed her how to do this part of my job and she can be doing that while she is waiting on her own work coming in.
(Manufacturing – operator – female)

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

At the care home, most of the interviewees' learning biographies are typical of working class females. One care assistant at the care home describes how she after leaving school turned to a working class occupation and worked fulltime in a factory until she got married. After she had her first child she continued working part-time. She shows great skills overlap between her private and work spheres. Before joining the care home she was looking after elderly relatives and neighbours and worked as a "positive help" in the community. Skeggs (1997) describes this pattern of working class women acquiring the technologies of a caring self in order to be able to care the very young, old and ill for very low wages.

Generally interviewees appear more confident in their roles in their workplace and are unlikely to refer to everyday activities such as running a home and taking care of children in terms of "skills". One example is a senior care assistant who describes how she would be unable to apply skills she uses at work in her everyday life stating "outside I would have froze", and "I knew nothing when I came in" suggesting that knowledge acquired outwith the workplace is less valuable. She does not appear to assume full ownership of the knowledge she possesses. Contrary, the staff nurse appears to see learning as part of her responsibility rather than an opportunity, assuming that her knowledge is important and that it is important for her job that she continues to learn. In this way she seems to assume ownership of knowledge in a way other members of staff do not. Darrah (1996) argues that lower status workers are likely to be denied the learning affordances enjoyed by high status workers, a point illustrated by these case studies. Operators at the manufacturing company clearly do not take workplace learning opportunities for granted: *I only work six hours a day so it would be a cheek!* *(Operator-manufacturing company-female)*

CONCLUSION

The two companies discussed in this paper appear to represent two different approaches to organisational learning. The care home has taken a social approach, emphasising the team and the social aspects of learning. Employees view learning as a continuous process and recognise all types of learning and knowledge transfer between communities inside and outside the workplace occur. Employees have developed learning identities, focusing on competence as well as knowledge, and are given opportunities to develop within the workplace, one example being extended job-roles. The care home provides an example of an expansive framework and a company that afford their employees opportunities to learn (Unwin and Fuller, 2004; Billett, 2004).

Much learning takes place "on-the-job" suggesting the importance of "reactive" or "incidental" learning and thus depends on the carer noticing the work of senior members of staff (Lee et al, 2007). The matron as well as members of staff emphasised the great degree of emotional labour in the job. It is argued that emotional labour should be formally recognised as a key skill in the health-care setting in facilitating the patient's journey with emotional skills being taught outside the classroom setting (Mann, 2005).

The manufacturing company has taken a technical approach to learning and there is an emphasis on technique acquisition rather than on team work or the strengthening of the learning identities of employees. Little knowledge transfer occurs between communities within or outside the work place and there is an emphasis on single-loop learning. Employees are aware of the company policy in regards to learning, although they use "their own initiative" to deal with everyday situations, the governing variables do not appear to be overtly challenged. There is a clear lack of communication between management and staff. This case study indicates that even in cases in which the management is reinforcing an organisational learning culture, emphasising technical aspects,

employees appear to seek social learning strategies and build on team work to deal with everyday problems thus supporting Wenger's theory (Wenger, 1998).

Both managers perceive employees to be interested in learning and training; however it appears that different attitudes towards learning may result in differing ability to benefit from learning and training activities. Different emphasis is placed on recognition of various forms of learning; the respect given the individual's choice to participate in learning and training activities at the care home contrasts with that of the manufacturing company where training is a requirement and employees have little or no choice whether to participate. Although the production manager recognises that members of staff are interested in learning and training he chooses to focus on short-term training for immediate work-related pay-back. This seems to counteract his ambition to get members of staff more involved in the development of the company (Billett, 2001). It should, however, be noted that whereas members of staff at the care home are deepening their knowledge of care, employees at the factory are hoping to be able to move away from the organisation into a completely different field. It appears that employees who feel more valued in their workplace are more likely to stay.

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