

## **The Production of Knowledge in Work Teams: The View from Below**

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**Abstract: This paper examines the experiences of entry level hourly wage workers in a workplace shaped by the "excellence" movement. Their micro-level encounters with the "new work order" are set within the macro-level economic, political and cultural context that structures the work experience.**

### **Purpose of the Study**

A rapidly growing body of theoretical and empirical literature on workplace learning presents the top-down perspective of upper management with the value of learning measured by bottom-line profitability (Bierema, 1997; DiBella & Nevis, 1998; Easterby-Smith, Burgoyne, & Araujo, 1999; Marquardt, 1996; Watkins & Marsick, 1993, 1996). This study makes a contribution to the literature on workplace learning as experienced from below, from the perspective of entry-level hourly wage workers. Providing the opportunity to discover how workers as learners interact within an organizational context framed by the "excellence" movement in management, this paper examines one perspective of how the social, economic and political context impacts and is impacted by these workers as learners. Previous research has contributed to an understanding of the political and power dynamics within a culture of teamwork (Barker, 1999; Brooks, 1994, 1995). This study sought to move beyond a focus on individuals to examine the structures and culture of informal learning within a specific functional work-based team. Specifically, the study asked: What meaning do members of the work team make of the discourse on "excellence" and how does this discourse reflect issues of hegemony, power and control? How do these constructed meanings affect their understanding of learning and the production of knowledge in the workplace? What do team members see as the objectives of their participation both as individuals and for the organization? How would a critical understanding of workplace practice enable workers to participate in creating a more democratic workplace? This research is part of on-going research to develop a deeper understanding of the values, thinking, character, background and motivations of the workers as well as the underlying assumptions that influence how we see the world. According to Newman (1995), if ". . . we can learn to see through ourselves, . . . [we] may be enabled to better understand and see through others as well" (p. 254).

### **Situating the Study**

This study was influenced by the literature on how the "excellence" movement and learning discourses shape the world of work (Cunningham, 1993, 1998; Darrah, 1996; Foley, 1999; Graham, 1995; Kincheloe, 1999; Orr, 1996). This literature situates "excellence" and learning in the workplace within the broader socio-economic context of what Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996) refer to as the "new work order." The micro-level themes that emerged from this literature included the production of knowledge and the centrality of learning, issues related to

empowerment and participation, as well as work intensification and multitasking. These studies on workplace change broaden the discussion to the macro-level demands of the global marketplace, making visible the corporate culture of the free market. The hypercompetition of the global marketplace drives the ideology of corporate libertarianism that drives the economic and political activity impacting the interactions of workers. (Foley, 1999; Garrick, 1998; Newman, 1994). This research focused on a work based team environment situated in a particular place, at a particular time in history and how the discourse on "excellence" is "*reproduced*" within their administrative work unit set within the larger organization.

Making use of "the situation-at-hand," the selection of this administrative unit, Customer Support Services, within this particular institution, Scrivener State, ". . . takes advantage of existing circumstances which are relevant to a particular topic of study . . . [providing] . . . for the use of personal, grounded experiences as a source of data and method of interpretation" (Cook & Fonow, 1986, pp. 20-21). This research setting provided the opportunity to study the complexities of the structures and culture created by quality management initiatives, techniques and tools in a particular workplace set within the context of the larger social system. Examining the work experiences of former members of the Processing Team in Customer Support Services, the research focused on the various forms of learning taking place within the context of a continually changing work environment. Quality management had been a part of the organizational environment since 1992. Within this context, Customer Support Services embraced process improvement, "participation," and "empowerment" for all workers in an ongoing search for better ways to serve customers and to reduce manual work. The three former entry-level hourly wage workers who participated in this study had been members of the Processing Team, one of six functional teams within Customer Support Services. In 1994 the team had eleven members. By the fall of 1998 the team had nine team members, a reduction of 18 percent. After a period of relative stability four of the nine member team had been a part of the team for less than a year. Both entry-level hourly wage workers and salaried wage workers were questioning the evolving complexity and increased workloads: Why had all of the improvements over the years not lessened their workload or made the workplace less stressful? Why were workers expected to take on more and more work, serving increasing numbers of customers as well as handling more discrete tasks? Why were positions not being filled when the volume of work was increasing?

Throughout this study, I was researching my own evolving understanding of the kinds of learning taking place, asking what should "participation" and "empowerment" look like for critical learning to take place? What did informal learning look like? What types of workplace practices might lead to a more democratic workplace? This study set out to add to and enhance my understanding of how and what we as work team members learned as a part of a functional work based team operating within a quality management work environment. The perspectives of the three entry-level hourly wage workers were expected to enhance my understanding of the impact of these initiatives on our lives, both at work and outside of work. Thus, this study set out to ask what kinds of learning best serve human emancipation and how can we, as workers, construct the types of learning experiences to help us move collectively beyond being viewed only as "human resources" serving larger institutional values and goals.

## **Research Design**

Informed by critical theory, this study incorporates concepts from critical ethnography and critical action research as well as issues related to theories of power as enacted through ideology, hegemony and discursive practices. Since this study moves beyond understanding the technical implementation of quality management techniques to examine how economic, social and political structures are used to establish and sustain the shared meanings, beliefs and behaviors of the organization. Meaning depends on issues of power, what questions are asked, what is hidden from observation, whose interests are served and whose meaning prevails (Kincheloe, 1995).

Multiple sources of information were used to provide an in-depth understanding of the complex process of informal learning and the production of knowledge within the Processing Team. Data sources included field notes, reflective journals and a series of three semi-structured interviews with three former work team members. Additional information was provided by document analysis of various HRD course materials, strategic plans, e-mails, memos, and policy statements. Throughout the process of coding and analysis, an iterative process of identifying common themes and patterns of interaction and then rereading the original interviews and journals to connect the micro-level stories of the entry-level hourly wage workers to the macro-level systems, structures and cultural themes was followed (Carspecken, 1996; Seidman, 1998).

As an insider, a team leader and worker, I am an actor / researcher within this workplace (Kincheloe, 1991). The dual role of worker and researcher in the workplace is based on the idea that ". . . knowledge for [working] is 'inside/outside,' a juxtaposition intended to call attention to [workers] as knowers and to the complex and distinctly nonlinear relationships of knowledge and [working] as they are embedded in the contexts and the relations of power that structure the daily work . . ." (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993, p. xi). I hold an insider's view as an actor in the day-to-day activities of this administrative unit, serving in leadership and worker roles on several standing teams as well as on teams formed to examine special issues. As an actor in the daily work processes, my observations, and reflections informed the context of this research.

## **Findings**

Three themes emerged from the study. 1) The stress discourse was used as a mechanism to control how workers understood their work experiences, turning inward on the individual. 2) Training courses and programs dealing with customer satisfaction prepared workers to "put on masks" in order to perform their tasks. In other words, they were asked, and in some cases forced, to be someone they were not or did not want to be. 3) Empowerment often had contradictory meanings for the workers. Workers became active participants in process improvement, however, as they took on more and more responsibility they began to question whether their interests matched the interests of the organization. The study discussed the ways workers struggled to gain some control of their work. These struggles took many forms including resistance to the use of technology, increasing tension between salaried and hourly-wage workers, largely - though not exclusively - based on social class differences, and increasing resistance to participatory programs that often resulted in increased expectations through use of multitasking. This section focuses on the stress discourse as a mechanism to control how workers understand their work experiences. Reinforced by the popular discourse on stress as an individual problem, organizational HRD courses and employee assistance programs (EAP) were

used to emphasize worker responsibility to adapt and assimilate organizational values, as well as to shape the way workers were expected to act and behave while at work.

Customer Support Services provided multiple opportunities to help workers deal with the stressful office environment. For example, during preparation for the start of each enrollment period, a time of even greater work intensification, job tasks piled up. Customers often expressed anger if they were unable to get through on the phones or experienced delays in the reception area. With a downsized workforce, the balance between direct customer contact and the processing of their paperwork created increased levels of tension. As one worker stated:

The workload was stressful even though you're told don't let that big pile of a hundred pieces worry you. It's in your box. That's okay. But every time you see it out of the corner of your eye, your pulse rate increases and your heart just starts pounding. That's stressful. Because you know you just want to get it done. They want me to get it done. It's not that they were coming down on us. It's just that constant reminder sitting in your box that you know needs to be done.

In 1999, for the first time there was recognition of the high level of stress. A general training and update session opened with relaxation exercises suitable to do at the desk. Then to welcome back an employee who had been off while recuperating from a mild heart attack, a description was read of a new "CardioPlex computer" with a variety of "hardware" and "software" to ease work related stress. "Software" products on this "high-tech computer" included: Bulls-Eye - a stress free decision making tool - darts; Fitness Assessment and Workout Manager; Fit for Life diet planner; Defib 98 and Electrode Pak for delivery of a jolt of electricity at a click of the mouse; and "ESC" providing a direct Internet link to 911 services. While recognizing a very busy and tense work environment, it reinforced the construction of stress as an individual responsibility to handle. Later that week I observed a supervisor trying to calm down a frustrated entry-level hourly wage worker by suggesting that she take several deep breaths, demonstrating the appropriate deep breathing technique. These coping techniques only dealt with the effects of workplace stress, not the deeper underlying causes.

The organization provided multiple opportunities to *learn how to deal more effectively* with stress. Formal HRD courses contributed to the individually focused understanding of stress, providing a wide range of "well-being" course offerings free or at nominal charge to help workers deal with commonly identified sources of stress both at work and at home. Course offerings included: *Nutrition* - healthy eating for self and family; *Exercise* - organized and self-directed; *Relaxation* - Yoga, Tai Chi, QiGong ; *Stress management* - coping strategies, reducing worry and interpretations of stress. Workers had opportunities to learn how to deal with stress by learning ". . . to think and move joyfully. . . to laugh at yourself . . . to see humor in stressful situations." Coping strategies consisted of learning ". . . [to] take time for you," and "erasing unpleasant thoughts more effectively". An announcement for stress reduction groups on a bulletin board in the break room was ". . . designed to help members feel more in control of their lives. . . [including] relaxation training, exploration of negative attitudes and imagery work to help develop positive coping strategies."

Professional organizations also contribute to the mainstream discourse on stress. A professional development seminar at a professional conference attended by several workers focused on issues of health, self-esteem, and attitude. The instructor provided self-administered stress level surveys and a fast paced, often humorous, dialogue suggesting that reducing stress would result in a healthier and happier work experience. She suggested taking control for one's life and taking time for one's self. Stress was portrayed as not only potentially destructive, but also as a good motivator. According to this adult educator, the right balance of stress was necessary to a productive working and personal life. The message, individuals cause their stress and are therefore responsible for controlling their own stress.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The stress discourse that permeates the workplace with the intent to mold and control the attitudes, behaviors and actions of workers follows the popular discourse that is present in society and within the "excellence" movement, in both private and public sectors as well as in academic research. Without question, the emotional and physical health of workers is important. However, this discourse stops short of taking a deeper, more critical look at what is actually happening at work. The focus on individual responsibility to become "stress-fit" matches the individualism of society at large. The stress discourse of the 1990s is narrowly focused on a decontextualized and apolitical account of stress. The social and the political remain on the periphery with the social reduced to the biological. The narrow construction of stress provides a superficial understanding of work. Stress management techniques provide mechanisms that support, encourage and require self-control, a subtle, hidden form of control. The good worker is one who is fit both mentally and physically. The stress-fit worker not only has the ability to handle the high pressure of a fast moving work environment, she actively engages with this discourse to give herself completely to the organization (Newton, 1995). The stress discourse normalizes change with stress-fit workers able to cope. The workers, not the environmental changes, become the problem. There is a shift from the individual as a social being to the individual as a productive body (Townley, 1994). The social, economic and political environments within which work takes place remain on the periphery with issues related to societal change and the changing environment of work largely ignored.

Based on the findings in this study, workers understand the uses and meanings behind many of the workplace practices that are used as mechanisms of control. However, their understanding is based on the effects of these management practices as workers have experienced them rather than having an understanding of the underlying causes. To move beyond this narrow understanding of work as defined and accepted within corporate capitalism to a deeper understanding of the assumptions that would allow for emancipatory learning and workplace democracy, adult educators need to become researchers of their own workplaces and their own involvement in this work. It is important that research go beyond the narrow confines of the workplace, taking into account the broader social, political and economic context.

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