Refereed Articles

Critical Reflectivity Learning Theory: Implications for the Workplace

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Abstract

In this article the reader's attention is drawn to several concepts that have relevant implications for workplace educators and that parallel the three types of learning described by Mezirow. Briefly, these can be identified as: 1) reflection on experience, 2) the linkage between personal meaning and the socially created and contextual meanings that are found in organizational culture, and 3) the transformation of personal frames of meaning and reference.

Marsick (1988) has indicated that, as we move toward the twenty-first century, the workplace is increasingly being recognized as a setting in which significant learning can occur. The problem today, however, with many workplace training programs is that they are only partially successful in solving learning problems because training is often separated from context; even when steps are taken to help transfer training skills to the job, workers are left on their own to assess how these training skills connect to real world situations and workplace problems.

The most used model for training in business is the behaviorist (Marsick, 1988). This sequenced process of learning is based on the ability of learners to attain clearly defined learning objectives specified by observable outcomes. Although this approach is necessary and even valuable in some instances, such as in technical training, Brookfield (1989) argues that this viewpoint is ill-suited to contexts in which learners are trying to develop self-insight or interpret and find meaning in their past experiences. The behaviorist perspective may be the safest method of training in organizations, but in many cases it may hinder rather than enhance learning. Behaviorist training that emphasizes acquiring and demonstrating previously defined skills, knowledge, and behaviors focuses on what trainers do to employees. In contrast, learning involves employees as active participants in expanding their own skills.

Training programs need to provide employees with a conceptual

foundation for analyzing problems, making decisions, and learning independently. Workers today need to be able to analyze situations, determine the nature of the problem, and define their own solutions to these problems, often on the job. The central goal of this article is to examine the critical reflectivity perspective and analyze its potential contributions to facilitating learning in the workplace. The critical reflectivity theory addressed in this article attempts to capture what is unique about adult learning; the unique qualities of adult learning, suggests Merriam (1987), are the qualities upon which adult learning theory should be based.

Mezirow (1981, 1985) has identified a theory of learning based on the theories of Jurgen Habermas that simultaneously accounts for the need to develop job skills and the fact that this learning is intertwined with learning about the self and the workplace organization. In an effort to describe and understand learning, Mezirow differentiates three interrelated, but distinctive functions of adult learning: instrumental, dialogic and self-reflective.

1. The instrumental focus is described as task- oriented problem solving that generally occurs in the workplace when workers learn how to improve job performance. It is central to prescriptive technical training, which concentrates not on the why, but on the how.

2. In contrast, dialogic learning occurs in the workplace when workers learn about the organization's culture, goals, and policies. Dialogic learning is the means by which we attempt to understand what others mean in communicating with us through speech and the written word.

3. Self-reflective learning concerns workers learning to understand themselves. Self-reflective learning means becoming critically aware of what has been taken for granted about one's learning and the assumptions underlying one's values and behaviors. In this meaning transformation process the learners are presented with a different way of interpreting thoughts and patterns of action, and the previous meaning schemes are reconstructed to incorporate alternate views of themselves and their world. In this manner, learners can better understand themselves and the role they play within their organization.

Mezirow (1985) writes that learners, to become critically reflective, must bring their "assumptions, premises, criteria and schemata into

consciousness and vigorously critique them" (p. 25). Mezirow (1981) also identifies this perspective transformation as the central role of adult learning. Becoming aware of "why we attach the meanings we do to reality, especially to our roles and relationships . . . may be the most distinguishing characteristic of adult learning" (p. 11). Change in the way a person interprets the meaning of experience results from reassessing presuppositions and reformulating assumptions "to permit a more inclusive, discriminating and integrative perspective" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 18). Marsick (1988) notes that while it is difficult to separate instrumental, dialogic, and self-reflective learning in a given situation, learners can become aware of the connections among the three domains when they become critically reflective. In this view, learning in the workplace is not just adding to what we already know, but transforming what is already known and, in so doing, emancipating the learner.

A New Focus

Critical reflection is important to business because as the focus of business becomes more customer-service oriented, workers must be able to conceptualize products, services, and the consequences of their own role in the product-service process. More and more, employees at all levels are challenged to deal with uncertainty, to revise tasks, and to anticipate unfamiliar problems. In addition, as "work" in our information-centered culture becomes more abstract, workers need to develop a higher level of both conceptual and communications skills. Developing these skills requires critical thinking. Brookfield (1987) has identified several important elements central to fostering critical thinking in the workplace. He notes that the essential aspects are: 1) identifying and challenging assumptions; and 2) exploring alternate ways of thinking and acting.

Identifying and Challenging
There are a number of helpful strategies that adult education practitioners in workplace settings can implement to help workers identify and challenge their assumptions. These strategies include: use of role play, critical questioning, critical incidents, case studies, and development of theories-in-use. The overarching purpose of these strategies is the active involvement of participants in dialogue. Learners engage in dialogue with each other to see and benefit from multiple perspectives on a problem and to challenge one another's assumptions about a workplace situation.

Learners may question: Could it be this way? Could it be that way? Or could it be many ways? Participants can develop new insight and awareness as well as utilize their past and present experience. The result of using the techniques discussed above often is a redefinition of the problem situation. The strategies also focus on a central element of critical thinking—the ability to take on a perspective of others.

According to Brookfield (1987), developing theories-in-use is one of the most important ways critical thinking can be practiced in the workplace. Argyris and Schon (1974, 1978) offer a useful way to understand this process. They suggest that when people are asked how they would react under certain circumstances, the answer they usually give is an espoused theory of action for that situation. However, the theory that actually governs their actions is a theory-in-use, which may or may not be compatible with this espoused theory. It is not possible to learn what someone's theory-in-use is simply by asking; the adult education practitioner and the learner must construct the theory-in-use by observing the learner's actions and behavior. When there is a clear difference between the espoused theory and the theory-in-use (workplace reality), workers must begin to reevaluate their practice.

Explaining Alternate Ways of Thinking and Acting
Workplace problem solving is the ability to bridge the gap between what is and what ought to be, to imagine alternatives. Problem solving skills involve the ability to recognize and define problems, invent and implement solutions, and track and evaluate results. The ability to solve unfamiliar problems also includes a significant measure of creativity. Once the creative capacity to imagine alternatives has been realized, it is only a short step to considering how this activity can be implemented in the workplace. The more connections that can be made by insights gained through exercises and the work setting, the more effective and useful that learning will be. Strategies to help learners imagine alternatives include: creative problem solving, brainstorming, role play, games and simulations, journal writing, peer learning groups, and reflection on experience.

As critical thinking is a context-embedded skill, it would have a better chance at being used in affecting how people think and act in real life if it is developed in the context in which it is to be applied; perhaps the most promising strategy to foster critical reflection in the workplace is to model critical thinking. When facilitators are critically reflective about their own work, values and relationships, they model critical thinking. In addition,

employees who think critically can be used as mentors to other employees in the workplace. Brookfield (1987) notes that when a particular worker is skilled at critical thinking, the probability of transferring learning to others increases markedly.

Implications for Adult Educators

While it is tempting to present a list of dos and don'ts, teaching and modeling critical reflection cannot be reduced to a prescription because approaches of educators involved in facilitating the process vary. In addition, any models or tools that are utilized cannot be easily standardized and are substantially affected by context (Brookfield, 1987). As Mezirow (1990) writes, critical reflection "is not concerned with the how or how to of action, but with the why, the reasons for and the consequences of what we do" (p. 13).

What can be prescribed, however, is the need for workplace educators to encourage learners to critically scrutinize their values, beliefs and assumptions. Workers need to understand problems, to work with other people in process, and to challenge each other's thinking about related problems. As learners become aware of underlying workplace assumptions, policies, and objectives and view them as determined by context, they can gain self-insight and become actively involved in their own learning process.

Organizations know that they need an educated workforce of employees, but for years have discouraged thinking and have even organized jobs so that workers didn't need thinking skills. In today's turbulent economy, workers at all levels are called upon to think differently and more deeply about themselves, their work, and their relationship to the organization. A theory of learning in the workplace should include provisions for helping adults understand and interpret the meaning of the full range of events that occur in that setting. The choice to foster critical reflection involves more than accepting a theory of how adults learn—it also involves examining the values and assumptions underlying the appropriate function of workplace learning.

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