Learners' Perspectives of the Train-the-Trainer Program in Creating the Role of Classroom Trainer

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Abstract: Learners in train-the-trainer courses typically are presented with prescriptive content, yet the classroom setting is dynamic. This study examined the meaning participants in three train-the-trainer programs gave to the role of classroom trainer.

Training is no longer the "invisible" educational system in the United States; rather, employer-based education is recognized as the largest delivery system of adult education today (Carnevale, 1989, p. 27). This phenomenon has led to interest in workplace learning and the creation of "learning organizations" (Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Moreover, organizations are downsizing, and many employees are assuming multiple roles. One role that employees undertake is that of non-professional or part-time trainer. Training interventions that prepare employees for this additional role are train-the-trainer courses. An important yet little understood question is the meaning the participants give to these courses. This study contributes to our knowledge of the teaching-learning transaction by examining (a) learning from the perspective of the learner and (b) the role of prior experience in learner development as trainer.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore new and experienced trainers' perspectives of the train-the-trainer process. The curriculum in train-the-trainer courses has been developed prescriptively; the development of lesson plans, methods for delivering material, techniques for asking questions, and "tips" for controlling participant behaviors are documented. The curriculum--what is taught and how this is taught--is explicit; what is learned by the participants is unknown. Thus, this study examined the meaning learners give to this training intervention and the role of learners' prior experience in learning to be a trainer.

Theoretical Framework

As the questions guiding this inquiry were questions of meaning, the theoretical orientation was phenomenological (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The fundamental assumption of this approach is that meaning is socially constructed, subject to negotiation, and "interpretation is essential" (p. 34). How do the learners interpret what a trainer "is" and "does"? Kolb defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984, p. 38). How are learners transformed, if at all, in a train-the-trainer course? Previous experience provides "a repertoire of examples, images, understandings, and actions" (Schön, 1983, p. 138). What role, then, does experience play in learning to be a trainer? The theoretical work of Kolb (1984) and Schön (1983, 1987) contributed to the underpinnings of this study.

An examination of the literature indicated that this type of study had not been done in the training context of business and industry (Slusarski, 1998). This study, therefore, builds on these previous studies of the training of trainers in an organization and adds new understanding by

examining the learners' perspectives of the train-the-trainer process in creating oneself in the role of trainer.

Research Design

The research questions guiding this study were: What meaning do people who are being trained to be trainers give to the training experience? What do new and experienced trainers claim to have learned? What role does the trainee's prior experience play? How, if at all, is the training environment gendered? How, if at all, does the trainee's perspective change over the course of the training process? We know what we teach in a formal sense (the curriculum); what is learned during the process is not known.

A qualitative case study methodology (Merriam, 1988) was used to explore the learners' perspectives from five train-the-trainer courses in three organizational settings--manufacturing, service, and governmental. I served as a participant observer in three different train-the-trainer programs (five classes) and then conducted follow-up interviews with participants and trainers. Although each of the three courses involved some aspects of total quality management or quality service, the focus of this study was on the learner, not the quality content per se. Similarly, the instructional model used in the three train-the-trainer courses was influential but not a focus of this study. Although there are other models for teaching (e.g., Vella, 1994), the instructional model used in all three settings was essentially a transmission model or a prescriptive approach. Thus, the focus of this study was on the learners' perspectives of what actually took place in the train-the-trainer courses they experienced, rather than on the approach used or the quality content of the programs.

Data collection included extensive fieldnotes and memos from the 18 days of participant observation and 45 transcribed interviews of participants (36) and trainers (9). Analysis was performed using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1978; Wiseman, 1974). After transcribing the data and coding the transcribed material, I used the software program HyperRESEARCH to assist in sorting the data. With this grounding in the data and after conducting multiple passes through the data, I analyzed the data for unique and overarching themes (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Description

The three organizations studied were representative (but not conclusive) of the variety of settings in which train-the-trainer courses are held. The manufacturing organization was an established fortune 500 company with a global market. The service industry was a growing company that provided accounting services for small businesses across the United States. The third organization--the county, a governmental organization, provided services for its rural, urban, and suburban areas. Although the organizations had similar hierarchical structures, each organization had different organizational goals and nuances, which made them significantly different in their

organizational culture. In essence, each of the train-the-trainer programs was designed mainly to deliver information to the participants. The trainers in each of the settings were experienced trainers. The learners selected to attend the train-the-trainer training held either supervisory or staff positions. Some learners were new to the role of trainer; others were experienced trainers, either non-professional (training was an add-on to their job) or professional.

(training was their designated job). The organizations, the train-the-trainer courses, the trainers, and the learners provided a snapshot of the various settings where training occurs today.

Findings

The findings suggested seven unique themes: (a) understanding the purpose of training, (b) developing training skills and expertise, (c) idealizing the trainer models, (d) forming the self as trainer, (e) meeting the organization's expectations, (f) applying the training experience to the real world, and (g) learning with and from others (see Slusarski, 1998). The themes provided answers to the research questions.

What meaning did the train-the-trainer program have for these learners from the three settings studied? The learners described learning to be a trainer throughout the various themes, specifically within developing skills and expertise, defining the ideal trainer, and creating self as trainer. They recognized the organization's expectations and understood the purpose of training (as chosen by the organization). The learners were aware that the training they might conduct in the workplace would be similar yet different as they applied the information to their own "real world."

What role does the trainee's prior experience play? The participants in the train-the-trainer courses arrived in the classroom with varying degrees of experience and expertise in training. Some participants were novices and had no experience performing as a classroom trainer. Some desired to change jobs and work as trainers in the organization. Many had already conducted training classes within their organization as part (or all) of their job. A few participants were "moonlighters" who delivered training both part-time in their job as well as outside of the job, in paid or volunteer positions. As with many programs in adult education settings, the learners had varying levels of prior experience and knowledge on how to train in a classroom setting. Within the seven themes that emerged, the role of prior experience was evident.

How, if at all, is the training environment gendered? Issues of gender, race, and class were apparent in the three training environments studied; yet the issues remained "on the shelf" and unexplored by the learners. Similarly, in response to the research question--How, if at all, does the trainee's perspective change over the course of the training process?-- for most of the learners (with the exception of one participant), the trainees' perspectives were unchanged as the training process merely prepared them in the "how to" realm of training.

Conclusions

I suggest three conclusions as a result of the study: (a) participation in these train-the-trainer programs served to connect the learner to the organization; (b) the role of prior experience

provided contrast between learners who enter a train-the-trainer program with little or no prior experience in training and those who enter the event with prior experience training; and (c) although the training events as designed provided experience in instrumental and communicative learning, there were few if any opportunities for the learners to experience transformational learning.

First, participating in the train-the-trainer program served to connect the learners to the organization. These learners bought into the corporate message. Meeting the trainers and the other participants from different parts of the organization gave the participants a "human" connection to the organization. This study in the three settings--manufacturing, service, and governmental--confirmed that the training setting serves as a platform and vehicle for learners to identify the organization's expectations, to understand the culture of the organization, and to continue a career path (Bowsher, 1989; Thayer, 1989).

A second conclusion suggested is the importance of the role of prior experience for new and experienced trainers in a train-the-trainer program. In a training program, a participant learns about (or more about) the self, the job, and the organization (Brookfield, 1986; Marsick, 1987). (In addition, by virtue of the classroom setting, the participants learn about others.) If we view the teaching learning transaction through the learners' lenses, particularly that of prior experience, two different patterns are suggested. The new trainer's focus is on self: developing confidence and comfort while recognizing the importance of credibility by learning content in the future. The trainer contributes to the new learner's concerns by offering support ("You can do it!") as well as content ("And here's how!"). The focus of the experienced trainers, already possessing some level of confidence, comfort, and competence as a trainer (but this, too, may increase as a result of the learning experience), is on evaluating the trainer ("I do that already") and the techniques used in order to enhance their training style and competence ("Great idea!").

These two conclusions--connection to the organization and the role of prior experience--as suggested by the study contribute to our understanding of learning from the learners' perspective. However, there was a missing piece in the learner's experience; this was the opportunity for changes in perspective.

The organization's purpose in providing the train-the-trainer programs was to impart information, so that additional employees could serve as messengers for the organization. The participants' comments supported the success of the train-the-trainer programs in conveying the organizational messages and in preparing the participant for many of the components of conducting training (Bowsher, 1989; Powers, 1992). Thus, one goal was met. But, as Joyce and Showers (1988) recommend, developing employees should take into account two broad goals: AThe first is to enable the students to learn information, skills, concepts and values that comprise the curriculum. *The second is to increase the students' ability to learn in the future* (p. 3; italics added). As designed and delivered, the train-the-trainer programs studied met the first goal indicated by Joyce and Showers but not the second.

In examining the demands of the workplace today and in the future, it will not be enough to provide only "the rudiments of instructional skills" (Thomas, 1992, p. 170) to new trainers. Indeed, the efficacy of the trainer-as-messenger model has come into question (Senge, 1990;

Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Organizations should address the use of a transmission model for training employees and consider developing a "thinking" employee, one capable of critical thinking and reflection (Brookfield, 1987; Mezirow & Associates, 1991; Schön, 1983, 1987). Trainers are in an ideal position to inspire, challenge, and engage participants in their classes in ways that will challenge their assumptions.

But, as some would question, does transformative learning *really* have a place in the work setting? No, not as the workplace is conceived of currently as a top-down management style. But even this picture is undergoing changes as organizations seek new ways to stay competitive and make a profit in a global marketplace (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; London, 1989). Perhaps the time is right for organizations to change the focus from *delivering* training to promoting *learning* in a training setting (Marsick, 1988) and consider other models of management such as a participatory model. Perhaps the time is right for organizations to consider the outcomes from its investment in training as moving beyond instilling skills through instrumental and communicative learning approaches and into the realm of developing employees and expanding human potential through transformative learning approaches (Mezirow, 1991). Of course, instrumental and communicative learning are valuable. But in our changing world, it may not be enough; rather, the ability to think critically and act will be prized.

Implications for Practice and Research

The implications for practice as suggested by this study address the design of training programs, the learners who train part-time, and the organization (Slusarski, 1998). How do we teach, as Schön suggests, "professional artistry" in addition to "practical competence" (1993, p. vii) in a train-the-trainer program? Designing train-the-trainer courses to include a performance component enhances learning. Learners may want to seek additional avenues for developing as trainers. Organizations may desire to re-think the paradigm they currently use for training their employees and consider whether this messenger paradigm is developing the critical thinkers required in a workplace characterized by rapid change.

The directions for future research as suggested by this study focus on learning in a classroom setting. First, in listening to the learners' perspectives, I was chagrined to hear how unsafe the classroom environment may be to learners, even though the "techniques" for creating safe environments for learning (Hiemstra, 1993) were evident. Is it the learners' perspective that the classroom is place to take risks and "make mistakes," or is the reality different? Re-examining the paradigm of classroom as a safe place to learn is suggested.

A second research area is the learners' concern for "saving face." During the interviews, both trainers and learners in these classroom settings discussed used various tactics to "save face" (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Does "saving face" explain the "line of silence" that learners would not cross in response to some trainer questions? How, if at all, did the trainers use behaviors to enhance or diminish the learners' responses? How, if at all, does "saving face" relate to our human "need" or motivation of appearing competent (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1996)? Questions such as these encourage further research on learning in the workplace with respect to the literature on face and facework (see, for example, Ting-Toomey, 1994).

A third area aligned with this study on learner perspectives is the expert-novice literature (see, for example, Chi, Glaser, & Farr, 1988 as cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). This study indicated differences in perspective of learners with little or no prior experience and learners with experience as trainers. What would exploring the experts' perspectives, the trainers-of-trainers, add to our understanding of developing expertise as a trainer? How do trainers develop from novice to expert? We might even ask, are the terms "novice" and "expert" even applicable in a training setting? Does any adult enter a train-the-trainer program as a "true" novice?

The significance of this research was in examining the teaching-learning transaction from the learners' perspective. This study brought the learners' perspectives to the forefront of our understanding of the teaching-learning transaction, particularly the role that prior experience contributes in the meaning the learner gives to train-the-trainer program. Perhaps another contribution this research makes to the field of adult education is in examining the context of learning in organization, one of the greatest providers of adult education today.

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