Taking up talk at work

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In tune with lifelong learning discourses, adult learning is now understood to be anywhere and everywhere – in classrooms, in workplaces, in community settings and indeed in everyday life. This distribution of learning sites is accompanied by changing understandings of the relationship of formal and informal learning and of the role of adult education and adult educators. These changes in turn are reshaping learning theories and practices together with redirecting the research focus of adult educators. We suggest that this redirection can be a useful one. By researching learning across contexts, researchers are better able to engage with various kinds of pedagogic practices and therefore can contribute better to the debates and critiques of the changing relationship between education, training and learning.

In this paper we discuss some findings from a major research study that is concerned with ‘learning’ that does not sit within either education or training discourses. The study is a three-year Australian Research Council project: Beyond training: integrated development practices in organisations. Its focus is on organisational practices that facilitate learning yet are independent of formal training programs.

In the paper we draw on three examples of organisational practices within a large public sector organisation. They are all everyday ‘talking’ practices where ‘talk’ is linked to work performance, communication and learning. These issues resonate with those in the literature that refer to a ‘texualisation of work’ (Darville, 1995; Jackson, 2000) where workers are engaged in producing discourse that is outside their ‘normal’ organisational and occupational boundaries (Iedema and Scheeres, 2003, pp.317).

Research project

Our focus on everyday talking practices at work links to the current attention to informal or everyday learning. ‘Everyday learning’ is linked to new understandings of the importance of learning at work and have emerged in research over the last decade (Garrick, 1998; Hager, 1998; Boud and Garrick, 1999; Colley, Hodkinson et al., 2003; Eraut, 2004; Hager and Halliday, 2006). These understandings go beyond that of training and vocational skills development, by indicating new and different types of practices that are understood as potentially beneficial for learning (Edwards, Hanson et al., 1996; Billett, 2001). Indeed, some writers suggest that informal learning constitutes the main way that most people learn to do their jobs (Skule and Reichborn, 2002).

An important issue that surfaced in an earlier study ‘Uncovering Learning at Work’ was the critical role of ‘talk’ and ‘chat’ in everyday learning. The term ‘chat’ indicates social connections and interpersonal relationships that allow for talk to be spontaneous, free-flowing topics and seemingly without surveillance. In our study this kind of chat occurred in ‘in-between spaces’ and ‘hybrid learning spaces’ (Solomon, Boud and Rooney, 2006). These spaces covered various physical locations, ranging from tea-rooms to car trips. In addition some of the workers in the study talked to us about the usefulness of chatting about ideas, for example, ‘I was going to toss it around with these guys at lunchtime and
see what they thought’. In this example the word ‘toss’ draws attention to the chat nature of the talk, which not coincidentally occurred at lunch rather than in a meeting. Indeed lunchtime figured prominently as a chatting/learning space: ‘Every lunchtime we’re always sitting around the table and something will come up’.

The complexities of taking up everyday learning at work continue to emerge in a current three-year project. It aims to provide analyses of the lived experiences of people involved in these practices by investigating detailed accounts of specific practices and their effects. Interviews constitute the primary data source and the questions are designed to elicit narrative accounts of people going about their work.

This paper focuses on explorations of ‘integrative development practices’ in one of the organisational sites—a local government council. We collected narrative accounts of the work of over forty people across the organisation. In our initial analysis of this data, issues are emerging about the role of ‘talk’ at work and in learning (swapping stories) and importantly about the consequences of taking up, and indeed talking up, everyday work-talk.

The council is in a large Australian city, is among the largest local councils, and employs approximately 650 people. It provides a vast range of services and manages around $A900 million worth of assets: including roads and infrastructure, rubbish removal, public libraries, and cultural and community development. The data presented below comes from interviews across various levels of hierarchy within Civic Services and the Compliance Unit: including a ranger, parking officer and tradesperson, a team leader, and senior managers.

The organisation understands itself as an innovative public sector organisation. In terms of the professional development of all its employees it prides itself on being a forward thinking organisation keen to promote the human capital in its ranks. This can be seen in the many interventions implemented in the name of promoting workplace efficiency and learning. Below we present three of these implementations: laptops in vehicles, morning teas; and, toolbox talks. Each of the interventions are about ‘talk’ and ‘social relationships’, and each are experienced quite differently across the hierarchical divide. The later two interventions have been specifically implemented to coopt workers’ everyday ‘talk’, and in doing so promote learning.

Laptops in vehicles

Information and communication technologies have a ubiquitous presence in our personal and organisational lives—enabling work and social practices to travel great distances in space and time. It is therefore almost ‘natural’ for organizations to take up these technologies in their effort to increase productivity, efficiency and/or to promote workplace learning. To this end the council is installing laptop computers in rangers’ vehicles. The installation of laptops in vehicles means that the rangers, who are ‘on the road’, will no longer be required to call into the office yet will be able to perform their duties online. The senior manager of the Compliance Unit, is enthusiastic about ‘developing the rangers’ and views the installation of computers as a positive intervention that can achieve this:

We want to develop our rangers into really important people, well they are important people but aren’t really given all the tools they need to deliver the services that are on their expectations we have and I think these laptops and their ability to be able to work more operationally out in the field with this information is important (Senior Manager).
Similarly, the rangers’ team leader also enthusiastically believes that the intervention is positive not only for the organisation but also for the rangers themselves:

I’m getting the direct feedback—what I’m getting from the rangers themselves is that they can’t wait until it comes in—so that’s good—so as a general principle it appears as though they see their work improving because of this ability to be able to do their work in the car (Team Leader).

However, despite this ‘direct feedback’ to the team leader, one of the rangers has different understandings about what might be achieved by this intervention:

What’s it going to achieve? You know, they want to get us out of the office, so they’ve got more office space for some other mysterious thing they’re going to do, maybe, you know—you put people in the car all the time, people become a bit isolated and the interaction’s not there—people send each other emails, but people don’t talk like they used to.

… you don’t need to talk to anybody any more, and what sort of environment’s that (Ranger).

For this ranger, ‘talk’ was an important aspect of his work and one that he describes as contributing to a positive work environment. For this person, the installation of a laptop in his vehicle comes at the cost of limiting opportunities for talk. Indeed the importance of the role of talk in workplaces is central to ‘compulsory morning teas’, a second management intervention at the council’s Compliance Unit.

Morning teas

Networking ‘is part of everyday life in companies’ (Bottrup, 2005, pp.508), and is a popular topic in academic and management guru literature alike. Whether it is learning about the broader business environment, or learning within and across organisational silos, networking is touted as an important strategy because of its capacity to promote organisational learning (Bottrup, 2005). The importance of networking was also a common theme throughout our discussions with council managers. For example, in reference to his own work, a senior manager noted the importance of networking with people across the organisation in comments like the following:

... we’ve got a manager’s meeting this afternoon, and it’s a piddly little agenda, but it’s the coming together and sharing—I’ll bring the customer service section up that has no knowledge of what happens on a day to day basis in the life of these guys, and I’ll stick [name] in there, who has a narrow engineering view, and he will hear other perspectives, and it will challenge his thinking (Senior Manager).

A senior manager from another unit also identified networking as an important activity in regard to his work:

I’ve got pretty strong relationships – I maintain a strong network ... mainly because again it comes back to my interest in the whole (Senior Manager).

Managers also noted the advantages of this practice for field workers who could establish and maintain networks specific to their work:

There are formal networks for the rangers and networks with the health inspectors … you have networks that look after food shops ... (Senior Manager).
Despite not necessarily naming it as such, field workers also spoke about the importance of utilising networks across the organisation:

If you really want to know something, you’re going to go and talk to the person who actually does it, you know ... I’ll go and talk to a street cleaner (Ranger).

To create conditions for networking, the Compliance Unit has implemented compulsory ‘morning teas’. Given that field workers are by definition ‘in the field’, the senior manager indicates that morning teas are ‘the only time they can get together’. Morning teas then provide conditions for networking. In other words, these are gatherings where field workers are encouraged to network with workers across the various sections of the unit (e.g. rangers with parking officers with health officers and so forth). The manager goes on to explain:

... if someone has been out to a course they will give a brief talk to that team and say that’s what we’ve learned—it won’t be written and it won’t be formal but that’s one way of integrating what was learned back in—particularly if it’s an expensive course we’ll insist on getting some more value out of that cost (Manager).

As the later comment alludes to, the morning teats serve an additional function. In addition to networking and learning, they serve to value-add to the costs of formal training. First, the workers who might have learned from their everyday experiences are required to share their learning with co-workers. Next, workers who have attended formal ‘expensive’ courses must share their learning by ‘reporting back’. Once again, however, those ‘being developed’ understand ‘morning teas’ as something quite different. As one parking officer told us:

... we have a compulsory morning tea, believe it or not, to make people talk to each other, and it’s really strange because all these people in the office that you don’t know and you can’t really talk to them because you’re only sort of may talk to them once a month—and I feel sorry for all the rangers standing there together, and some people mix, but not really (Parking Officer).

In another interview, one of the rangers concurred: ‘We just stand around and stare at each other’.

**Toolbox talks**

A final and related example from the Compliance Unit is that of ‘toolbox talks’. A toolbox talk is a formalised version of ‘chat’ about work that is basically ‘a meeting held between the workgroup and the immediate supervisor held in their place of work’ (Quemard, 2004, pp.10). In a sense, these toolbox talks seek to replicate workers’ informal chats about their work. The senior manager understands the importance of these gatherings for the learning of field workers:

... they can sit around and swap stories and have a bit of a laugh ... um but they learn (Senior Manager).

Over the course of our research many field workers provided examples of how they would ‘chat’ about their work (‘sit around and swap stories’) and would indeed learn from these chats. For instance, one field worker spoke about how the Rangers arrange to meet in a park over lunch and chat about (among other things) their work:

... mainly we talk about work and mainly we talk about how slack the management is and how out of touch they are, and we whinge (Ranger).
However, unlike an informal chat where workers might ‘swap stories’, ‘laugh’ and ‘learn’, a toolbox talk is a formal intervention specifically implemented to promote workplace learning. When asked though about the differences between chats and toolbox talks another worker explained:

I suppose with the tool box talk you’ve got to diarise it—and for me it doesn’t happen as effectively as if you’re just having that chat—because you start trying to put everything on paper and then you get 50 of these [reports]—where it was just informal chats that happen (Tradesperson).

**Discussion**

Reorganising work practices and implementing systems or programs are not an unreasonable response by managers to maximise learning in the workplace. As described above, one organisation has made several such interventions. First, the ‘laptops in vehicles’ intervention, which provides an example of the reorganisation of work and of work spaces in an effort to bring about more efficient work practices (O'Toole, 2001). Second was the ‘morning teas’ that were a well-meaning attempt to create legitimate space for networking, and through extension promote workplace learning. And finally, the example of ‘toolbox talks’ that can be read as an attempt by management to systematise an informal activity that was already occurring.

Looking across these examples draws attention to the centrality of ‘talk’—either it being thwarted (as in the laptop scenario) or it being a requirement for learning (as in morning teas or toolbox talks). Indeed, the morning teas and toolbox talks are good examples of the textualisation of contemporary work and the contemporary worker who must perform their work, ‘but [must] also talk about it, think about it, and change it’ (Iedema, 2003, pp.18). However, the field workers in this organisation gave several examples of where this talk already occurred in a more ‘organic’ sense – yet at the same time they appeared clearly resistant to attempts to systematise this ‘talk’.

Both morning teas and toolbox talks are interventions that are premised on unstructured gatherings where workers talk about their work and coincidentally learn from each other. In this way their systematisation can be seen as an attempt to capture, name and make the most of ‘talk’ and as such are an attempt to formalise an existing informal practice.

However, as illustrated above, the formalising of ‘chat’ has some complex consequences. Firstly, this kind of intervention suggests that management acknowledges that workers learn from people through chat. But what is not recognised is that by imposing and thus formalising chat, the nature and value of chat changes when chat is made compulsory and when the chatters come under surveillance.

Importantly our research shows that it is through local social relationships that everyday learning occurs. Local relationships are needed to carry out broader initiatives into everyday work practices and these local relationships can provide opportunities for everyday learning. It has been this understanding that has prompted the interventions of practices like toolbox talks and morning teas above.

For both management and workers, ‘talk’ is understood as vital for work performance, communication and learning. Yet, as illustrated above, this shared understanding can break down when it comes to the expectations and experiences of the talk interventions. Understanding the reasons for the coexisting appeal and problems with taking up talk as a way of organising work, improving productivity at the same time as promoting learning, can
draw on understandings about the workings of language and discourse in organisations today. The interventions described above can be understood as discourse practices that are reshaping work practices and the ways people communicate at work, and indeed the ways people construct their work identities. With these interventions workers are engaged with new technologies, with new forms of language, occupying different discursive spaces as they speak and write different kinds of texts. The experiences of these interventions are illustrated in the quotes above as the workers express their responses to the various changes in physical and occupational boundaries and the relationships within these. We see their concerns about ‘isolation’, not talking ‘like they used to’, ‘don’t need to talk to anybody anymore’, ‘compulsory morning tea, all these people in the office that you don’t know and can’t really talk to’. Their identities as workers are being challenged.

As described in Iedema and Scheeres (2003), the new talking and writing practices are constructing new links and networks for the organisation, where ‘talking work’ isn’t just talk or chat but is organisational talk. Workers’ constructions of themselves and who they are at work are particularly challenged by the ‘compulsory morning tea’ intervention. The structuring and formalising of morning teas is experienced as an appropriation of a personal discursive space, that could be understood in Rose’s terms as ‘governing the soul’ (1993). For the time being at least, by requiring workers to chat at particular times, the workers have been rendered inarticulate ... ‘we just stand around and stare at each other’.

Conclusion

While ‘talking’ and ‘social relationships’ were found to be an important learning practice in this study, as with the findings of an earlier study (Boud and Solomon, 2003), it seems that there is a vulnerability to the pleasures and gains from taking up talk for learning purposes. This is particularly so when ‘the talk’ comes under the performance and productivity gaze of the organisation. This is particularly the case when chat is made compulsory and when the chatters come under surveillance.

Once we start taking up everyday talk for purposes beyond its existing meanings and relationships, different meanings and relationships are constructed. While it may be possible to foster everyday chat we need to recognise that by taking up talk for learning purposes we may work against or inhibit its positive benefits. Indeed, we suggest that there are dangers in believing that if only informal learning could be formalised, then learning (thus productivity through extension) could be improved. This is not because informal learning and everyday chat at work are not important. Indeed they are vital, but by naming and managing them as learning, the meanings and experiences change.

References


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