

Qualitative methods in workplace learning

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Abstract: Methods of learning in the workplace will be introduced. The methods are connect to competence development and to the process of conducting development discussions in a dialogical way. The tools developed and applied are a fourfold table, a cycle of work identity, a plan of personal development targets, a learning meeting and a learning map. The methods introduced will aim to better learning at work.

Keywords: Workplace learning, competence development, leadership tools, knowledge management, strategic management

1. Introduction

The University of Helsinki is the oldest and largest university in Finland. It places heavy emphasis on research of a top international standards and high-quality teaching. Helsinki University Library is the largest multidisciplinary academic library in Finland. It operates on campuses and online. The four campus libraries and the joint services of the library are responsible for the information and library services for research and learning at the University of Helsinki. The number of library staff is about 230.

A new way of conducting development discussions has been implemented since 2010. A theoretical framework of a new, dialogical way is based on research and development work of Ph D Heli Ahonen (Ahonen 2008, 2010; Virkkunen and Ahonen 2008). Methods and tools e.g. development discussion form, learning plan schedule, learning meetings and maps, have been further developed in a close cooperation with the library. Development discussion form and learning plan schedule have been used in the whole library, but so far learning meetings and maps have implemented only in one of the campus libraries in Kumpula.

In this paper qualitative methods of enhancing learning at work will be described. Though emphasis is on application of multiple, qualitative methods quantitative techniques are not necessarily excluded. For instance participation

in learning meetings, group works was counted. It is important to notice that quantitative and qualitative methods are not opposite but they complement to each other (Fabritius 1999).

2. Workplace learning

Workplace learning can be divided into three general categories. Firstly most of professional development will base on on-the-job experiences, tackling challenges and solving problems in the course of work tasks; secondly learning from others e.g. receiving feedback, sharing experiences or following a colleague at work; thirdly a minor part will be based on formal training like courses and seminars.

The term 'informal learning has been increasingly used in adult education for several reasons. It provides a simple contrast to formal learning or training that suggests greater flexibility or freedom for learners. It recognizes the social significance of learning from other people, but implies greater scope for individual agency than socialization. It draws attention to the learning that takes place in the spaces surrounding activities and events with a more overt formal purpose, and takes place in a much wider variety of settings than formal education or training. It can also be considered as a complementary partner to learning from experience, which is usually construed more in terms of personal than interpersonal learning. Learning from experience, tacit knowledge and transfer of learning are included in the concept of informal learning. (Eraut 2004).

Workplace can be an organisation, an office, a website or even a home in the case of telecommuting. In the ideal workplace learning situation workplace learning is directed to increase innovative capacity and work capability in organisations; organisational culture supports and values workplace learning; workplace learning is an integral part of organisational strategic planning; workplace learning in all forms is valued and employed; workplace learning is tailored to individuals; networks, partnerships and supply chains are used to facilitate workplace learning. (Lung-Sheng and Chun-Chin 2012)

3. Development discussion process and learning plans

Library superiors conduct annual development discussions with each of their employees. During the discussions, the superior and employee talk about the employee's future goals, how the employee's own work contributes to the unit's goals, as well as the kind of competence and resources the employee needs to achieve his or her objectives. The role of the development discussion is to help managers and supervisors to assess the performance of their unit with respect to defined targets, to recognise the competencies and development potential of their staff. The target is to enable the success of the unit and its members as well.

The new kind of development discussion form was modified and tools were built up to help the conversation. In the course of development discussion emphasis was put on the dialogue: one listens to the other side in order to understand, find meaning, and points of connection. Successful discussions should be open and interactive, with both parties listening to one another and being prepared to both provide and receive feedback. An atmosphere of cooperation and shared understanding was sought.

The idea of fourfold table is to present library's target programme in a visual form both current and new work tasks are made visible. The four quarters of the fourfold table will describe different things, 1) basic work tasks conducted in the library, e.g. cataloguing, 2) how to improve and optimise these services so that they can be complemented as well as possible, and how they could be further developed 3) what services customers will want, and last but not least, 4) what kind of new services will be requested and should be developed in order to manage or even survive in a changing library environment. The employee should find her or his current and coming work tasks on the fourfold table. The point is that both the interests of the employee and the goals of the library should coincide.

Nowadays change and development are more rapid than before. Earlier we spoke about a profession, nowadays it is more precise to call it a work identity. The work we do has an influence on our identity. This kind of identity will transform over time. The work identity will evolve and grow at the same time as we learn and conduct various kinds of new work tasks. The work identity is rather a cycle than a stable entity.

In the course of development discussion the continuously changing work identity of the employee is discussed. In the very first dialogical development discussion also the previous work history of the employee is taken into account, and turning points of the work identity are examined from the point of view of learning new skills. Four types of learning will be found in the cycle of the work identity. They are survival, seeking, innovative and optimising learning. In the course of discussion the employee will reflect on which type of learning she or he is presently utilising in her or his work tasks.

The outcome of the development discussion is a plan of personal development targets. These targets will be written on the learning plan schedule. It defines what kind of knowledge and skills or behaviour one needs to develop in order to gain good work results. The employee will define three to five learning objectives which she or he will concentrate on during next few months. The way of learning is the employee's responsibility. Naturally the first idea which comes into one's mind is to search formal training events to achieve skills needed. But in some cases such formal training just doesn't exist. Therefore it is important to bear in mind various types of non-formal learning, e.g. working alongside others allows the employees to observe and listen to others and to participate in activities in order to learn new practices, to become aware of different kinds of knowledge and expertise, and to gain some sense of other people's tacit knowledge. Also working with clients may be useful. Tackling challenging tasks requires on-the-job learning, and suppose this is well-

supported it may lead to increased confidence and motivation. (Eraut 2004). Confidence and motivation may have an effect on a modification and development of one's work identity.

4. Learning meetings and learning maps

Usually learning meetings are held twice or three times in a year. The first learning meeting takes place before development discussions. The purpose of this learning meeting is to create a fourfold table functioning as a helping tool in development discussions. A preliminary work to construct the fourfold table is done by supervisors, but the whole staff of the unit will be involved to formulate it further in practice. The table will describe both stable and developing library services including customer relationships, network connections and new ways to product services.

The second learning meeting takes place after conducting all development discussions. Common attributes of individual plans will be discussed in the learning meeting in order to indicate important common learning goals of the unit which can be the whole library, team or some special service activity. It is important to build and form structures that facilitate team learning with features such as boundary crossing and openness. Team learning requires individuals to engage in dialogue and discussion; therefore team members must develop open communication, shared meaning, and shared understanding.

Many ways of arranging learning meetings have been tried out and tested. The very first learning meeting was begun in a simple way by talking in pairs and then the outcomes of conversation were gathered together. The other way is to do group works in advance. Members of the groups may be named beforehand by the supervisor or the groups are allowed to build up freely on the basis of peers. One possibility is that every group has a certain theme to work out. The most effective way proved to be theme based group works done in advance. In the meeting the group works were presented, discussed and developed further.

As a result of learning meeting the work community will create a common and shared learning map where the learning objectives are introduced, responsibilities are named, and the time of implementing is set. Since 2011 three kinds of learning maps have been tried out. The first was a simple chart and the second consisted of various inside circles describing tasks and activities. The latest and the most usable turned out to be a multidimensional chart where the common learning objectives were introduced, responsibilities were named, and the time of implementing was set.

5. Conclusions

The methods used can be divided into individual tools and those that serve on the work community level. The former are development discussion forms, the work identity cycle, and learning plans; the latter are fourfold tables, learning meetings and learning maps. Group work organised in various ways will enhance team learning. The benefit of team or shared learning is that the

problem solving capacity of the unit will improve through better access to knowledge and expertise. It is important to enable building structures that facilitate team learning with features such as boundary crossing and openness, this is especially the case in network connections. Learning meetings and maps require individuals to engage in dialogue and discussion; therefore they develop open communication, shared meaning and understanding. Visualisation techniques were applied in fourfold tables, in the work identity cycle and in learning maps. Visualisation helps us to comprehend information and to think about it more thoroughly and observing figures at a glance. A learning map where the objectives are linked to information sources also proved to serve a good tool in the orientation process of a new employee.

We need to support the work of supervisors as they conduct development discussions in order to make sure that dialogue really becomes effective in the course of discussion, and the tools help it will be properly utilised. We need to support employees as well. At first some employees had difficulties in making learning plans. The first idea to gain new skills was to find a formal training event where to attend. But there are several other ways like learning from others, shadowing, visiting the colleague who has similar work tasks etc. Ability to reflection is needed in order to learn from experience. Reflection is associated with learning that has occurred through experience. Reflection is also enhanced, however, when pondering learning events with others (Costa and Kallick 2008). Job rotation is one way of learning in a workplace. Thus far we have not succeeded well in promoting it.

Focusing on learning in the work is important due to the rapid change of our environment, and especially because nowadays it is more difficult to predict changes. The methods and tools introduced will help all kinds of learning at work. Through the methods introduced employees' active engagement and motivation to learn becomes a key element for upgrading library services and making sure that the library will achieve the goals set in its strategic plans.

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