“You Have Enough Problems Pop Up, You Start to Learn”: Contradictions Encountered in Learning a New Job

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the workplace learning experiences of professional staff at a small private college who changed jobs, primarily due to a departmental reorganization. In many cases, the emerging jobs were ill-defined, and participants found it challenging to be released from the responsibilities of their previous positions. A cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) analysis explored how these job changers pursued and attained competence in their new jobs. The analysis also exposed the contradictions within an activity system, proposed by CHAT, that shaped participants’ on-the-job learning: balancing conflicting expectations and goals, being responsible for multiple, ill-defined roles, managing bureaucratic and technological constraints, and mitigating discrepancies in ‘sense of urgency’ and vision across the institution. While individual workers were not resistant to learning their new jobs, their pursuit of the object (competence in the new job) of the activity system was hindered by what seemed to be an organizational or structural resistance to their learning process.

KEYWORDS

Colleges and Universities, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, New Employees, Staff Development, Workplace Learning

INTRODUCTION

As the landscape of higher education becomes increasingly fluid and ever more complex, understanding the multiple roles and the everyday workplace of professional staff members (i.e., those in non-faculty roles) has become more important (Hainline, Gaines, Feather, Padilla, & Terry, 2010; Hepworth, & Smith, 2008; Middlehurst, 2010; Rhoades, 2010; Walesby, 2013). In addition to serving a more diverse student body across an increasing number of modalities (e.g., face-to-face, blended, online), colleges and universities are experiencing increasingly “complex employment relationships” (Conley & Smith, 2013, p. 222) with faculty and staff. Given this context, it is not surprising that staff members frequently move to another new position within the colleges and universities where they are working; these changes may be made to promote the staff member’s own professional development and/or to better facilitate student outcomes and pursue institutional goals (Walesby, 2013). Between 2000 and 2012, the higher education workforce increased by 28%, and the increase is driven by new jobs created in professional positions such as admissions staff, business analysts, and student service related duties (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014). Furthermore, there is some data to suggest that internal transfers are on the rise within higher education institutions (Q1 2014 Higher Education Employment Report, 2014,

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Olson, 2015). The prevalence of these internal transfers is difficult to measure, however, since jobs filled internally may not be posted to public job-search websites or reported to any external agency.

And yet, these changes in roles and responsibilities do require job changers to engage in new learning as they adjust and adapt to the new position. However, shrinking budgets and increased workloads often result in limited resources for training and development (Conley & Smith, 2013). While new faculty/staff orientation is typically offered or mandated for employees new to the institution, this type of formalized structure rarely exists for those who make an internal transfer to a new position within the institution. In fact, daily, informal workplace learning for new tasks and roles from others and through their work is the most important source for staff in higher education who switch jobs (Hepworth & Smith, 2008; Middlehurst, 2010). Furthermore, when new positions are created (and old jobs eliminated) following a significant organizational restructuring, how do job changers learn to do jobs that did not previously exist at the institution? What factors facilitate or hinder their learning?

Literature related to employment within higher education often focuses on the experiences and development for those holding various types of faculty (Baldwin & Chang, 2006; Eddy, 2007; Olson, 2011; Ragan, Bigatel, Kennan, & Dillon, 2012; Tait, 2002) or administrative (Webb, 2009; White, 2012) roles. Largely missing from this conversation is an exploration and understanding of how professional staff members learn to do their new jobs, even though their daily learning in the workplace plays a pivotal role in developing their capacities and promoting organizational benefits. The more that professional staff maximize their competence on the job, the better they can support their students. The important role of university staff members for student learning has been evidenced in many studies (e.g., Braxton et al., 2004; Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011). Tinto (1993) defined university faculty and staff as critical agents in promoting success of underrepresented college students (e.g., low-income, first-generation) and subsequent studies provide evidence that underrepresented students often find great benefits by interacting with professional staff. Promoting student learning and development is a core mission and priority for universities and colleges. In order to achieve this goal, institutions need to pay attention to professional staff members’ learning and support their career development in the day-to-day working environment.

This study aims to explore the workplace learning of job changers following a significant organizational restructuring. Five of the six participants were making their way under job descriptions that had not previously existed at the organization; the sixth had moved into a previously existing role but was finding that the expectations were much different than he had anticipated. Taylor and Lounsbury (2016) suggested that “learning resistance often resides at the intersection of the personal and the environmental” (p. 27). This study focuses on the “environmental” side of that equation, exploring the contradictions that arise when job changers seek to learn how to do a new job in a resource-strapped environment where time and money for adequate training are scarce. Specifically, this article seeks to answer the research questions: What contradictions arose for job changers in a recently reorganized department? What impact did those contradictions have on the job changers’ workplace learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional staff in higher education can be largely categorized into four divisions: academic support, business/administrative services, external affairs, and student affairs (Johnsrud & Rosser, 2000). As such, professional staff encompass a wide range of administrative positions and play an important
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