

Researching the Individual in Workplace Research

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Abstract. Researching workplace practice, and how people are educated for practice, has often been seen as problematic. This paper recommends qualitative approaches that draw on hermeneutic phenomenology and narrative inquiry. We begin by examining assumptions underlying much workplace research and recent trends, such as social constructionism. There has been a gradual recognition of the importance of the social aspects of practice, and practice-based education, with the rise in popularity of such ideas as communities of practice, and the recognition of the significance of the work of scholars such as Vygotsky. However, the individual's interaction with the practice environment and their interpretation of their own experience has been somewhat neglected. We argue that there is an important dialogical relationship between the individual and the practice environment, affected by personal histories, workplace cultures, and education. We need more research that deeply engages with the individual's perspective on practice.

We argue that combining hermeneutic phenomenology and narrative inquiry can allow research to engage with the individual's subjective experience, and explore the relationships between individuals and their communities of practice. We also draw on the ideas of the Russian scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin, to further develop the importance of studying the dynamic dialogical relationships that individuals establish with themselves and their practice environments. Evidence from a study that looked at the practice-based education of medical students, and the experiences of people working in an interprofessional environment, is used to substantiate the importance of researching the individual perspective on practice and practice-based education.

1. INTRODUCTION

For several years now there has been a welcome and growing interest in the scholarship of the workplace and of how people are prepared for the world of work. With this has come a realisation that new ways of conceptualising and researching the workplace, and the workers in it, are needed in order to bring out and articulate the richness of practice [1]. This interest is combined with a parallel realisation that the manner in which people are educated and prepared for work and the world of professional practice needs new approaches and fresh ideas. There are a number of schools of thought that offer useful ways of opening up inquiry into this important area of human activity. However, there is a need to critically assess what they offer the scholar and researcher and explore ways in which they might be usefully combined. In this paper we look at some of these schools of thought and the advantages they can offer to scholars.

2. THE INFLUENCE OF VYGOTSKY

Michael Cole, the American psychologist, [2] described his experience on a research project in Africa that was intended to identify, and then deal with, the reasons that many African people seemed to struggle with classroom mathematics. However, Cole and his colleagues soon discovered that the African people in the study were just as capable of doing mathematics as people in the Western world. The significant difference was that the

African people displayed mathematical capability where and when it really mattered to them, in situations such as bargaining in the marketplace for example. The abstract mathematics of the classroom was seen as being completely divorced from the real world and was perceived as being a quite different kind of activity from that occurring in the marketplace, and with little relevance for real life. There are a number of lessons that can be drawn from Cole's description. One is the importance of studying real world activity, such as work, for understanding the abilities and skills people need to engage in practice. Another lesson is that classroom activity is always in danger of being so abstract, and removed from real life, that it risks becoming irrelevant and of little real use to those we would educate; hence the importance of educating people in settings that relate directly to the world of practice.

Cole also realised the weakness of the contemporary cognitive theories he had been using for conceptualising how people learn, and the importance of engaging with new thinking and new ideas about how people master the complex skills they need to engage with the world of work. In Cole's case he found a great source of inspiration in the work of the Russian scholar, Lev Vygotsky. Cole was, in large part, responsible for bringing Vygotsky's work to the attention of the Western world, co-editing a selection of Vygotsky's work in a landmark text [3]. Although Vygotsky's work was mostly written in the nineteen twenties it was

suppressed in his native Soviet Union for many years, and most scholars in the West were completely unaware of it until the efforts of people, such as Cole, brought it to the attention of a worldwide audience. It is sometimes claimed that Vygotsky's work is more relevant now than when first written [4].

The work of Vygotsky has started to have a profound influence on the ways in which we conceptualise issues such as learning. Some key ideas include the importance to learning of scaffolding and close interaction with others more expert than the students, articulated in the notion of the zone of proximal development. Such ideas offer a rich means of conceptualising many contemporary efforts in practice-based education. We have argued elsewhere [5] that problem-based learning tutorials are a classic example of a zone of proximal development in action. Adopting a Vygotskian perspective would permit these educational settings to be adequately theorised, at a time when problem-based learning is widely recognised as being effective for preparing people for practice, but is lacking a robust theoretical basis. It is widely accepted that in order to understand and develop problem-based learning further then a better theoretical basis is needed than the predominantly cognitive theories in use at present. Vygotsky's ideas provide such a basis.

Vygotsky also realised the importance of language, arguing that humans perceive the world as much through their language as through their eyes, claiming that thought is a form of internal conversation [6]. Language was seen as one of the artifacts by which humans mediate their interaction with the world, with each other, but above all, with themselves. An artifact is seen as being anything that humans make, modify or use in order to interact with the world around them and with each other. Obvious examples of artifacts include a craftsman's tools. Less obvious examples include the discourse a profession develops in order to conceptualise its work. Vygotsky's insights place a great emphasis on social interaction and are radically removed from the prevalent notions of cognitivism that learning and cognition are strictly individual affairs, occurring exclusively inside the heads of people, and similar to the information processing of a computer.

2.1 Vygotsky's Legacy

Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction as the foundation of human activity and learning has been a liberating influence and spurred on scholarship in a number of directions. For example, Cultural Historical Activity Theory is just one branch of scholarship that has emerged directly from Vygotsky's legacy [7]. Engeström, for example, gives an account of how this theory can be used to shed light on the ways in which teams in the workplace can collaboratively learn and reshape their work practice [8].

3. SOCIAL THEORIES OF LEARNING

Others too, have been inspired by Vygotsky's work. For example, Lave and Wenger [9] were profoundly influenced by Vygotsky's ideas when they developed the notion of situated learning and communities of practice. Many people are now finding that thinking about educational issues through the theoretical lens of communities of practice is a powerful means of conceptualising and articulating what happens, and what needs to happen, when learning to engage in practice in the workplace. A large body of literature on workplace learning is now emerging that utilises and debates the ideas that constitute the social theory of learning that is based on communities of practice [e.g. 10].

These ideas include the subtle but significant distinction between knowledgeability as opposed to the mere possession of knowledge, and the importance of incorporating skills and knowledge within a sense of identity when it comes to being a full member of a community of professional practice. Wenger [11] has also pointed out the importance of brokering between different communities of practice when it comes to innovation and coping with a rapidly changing world. This brokering is happening in the scholarship of practice as different schools of thought cross-fertilise each other.

4. IDENTITY AND ONTOLOGY

The potential for cross-fertilisation between different schools of thought can be seen in the widespread interest into the sense of identity and worldview that people develop as workers and individuals. Wenger's recognition of the importance of identity in the study of practice echoes the work of Schön [12] who pointed out that when a practitioner deals with a new professional problem the first issue is problem-setting. This means choosing and naming the things that will be noticed and the things that will be ignored, which he described as "naming and framing" [12, p. 4]. The naming and framing process is essentially discursive and depends on factors such as "disciplinary backgrounds, organizational roles, past histories, interests and political/economic perspectives". Schön indicated that this process of problem-setting is also an ontological process. The professional is engaged in a localised and specialised form of world-making and world interpretation. From this point of view, professional practice is much more than the straightforward epistemology or knowledge framing and use espoused in more conventional cognitivist views, which maintain that professional practice is simply an issue of acquiring and mastering a body of propositional knowledge and learning how to apply it. From this, more interpretive, viewpoint mastering and applying a body of knowledge are still important, but being a professional is much more. It is a way of being in the world. This was also recognised by Heidegger and Gadamer who developed the philosophy of hermeneutic phenomenology [13],[14]. They realised that our epistemology arises from our ontology. In other words, our ways of knowing about the world, including

practice, arise from our sense of who we are, our sense of identity.

This idea, of professionalism being strongly ontological, is echoed in the work of others, such as Thomas Kuhn [15]. Kuhn described how professionals (scientists in his case) live in the world, and perceive it, in a way that is radically different from non-professionals, and that this comes about because they have internalised a particular way of perceiving the world. A layperson might see lines on paper whereas a cartographer instantly perceives a terrain [15, p.111]. Kuhn also claimed that when scientists undergo a paradigm shift, that is, a radical change in the sets of ideas and assumptions they use to perceive and conceptualise the world, they themselves talk of life after this experience as being like living in a new world.

5. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

These insights have been synthesised (or brokered) within the postmodern school of thought widely known as social constructionism [16],[17] which is distinct from social constructivism. Constructivism is the view that individuals must construct knowledge for themselves rather than passively receive it from others. Social constructivism emphasises the role that our culture plays in helping us to shape that knowledge. Social constructionism accepts the tenets of social constructivism but places more emphasis on the role of language, such as professional discourse, not only in shaping the ways in which we construct knowledge, but in shaping the ways we go about the localised forms of world making described by Schön [12].

To say that the world is discursively constructed is not to claim that discourse is everything. Beckett and Hager [18] use the example of the victims of a road accident, suffering from injuries. As they astutely point out, to say that their injuries are purely discursive is a “rather thin account of what has happened to them” [18, p. 170]. Their injuries are a direct result of their embodied being in the world. However, discourse must quickly step in. If we are doctors, or paramedics, or even members of the public trying to offer first aid, then we will probably be using a mnemonic such as ABC (for airway, breathing and circulation). In other words, we are discursively constructing the way in which we will assess the injuries and how we might help. If the victims are conscious, and capable of speaking, then they can tell us things such as the fact that their leg hurts and won’t move. To do this, the victims are “constructing” their injuries within a discourse that will allow them to ask for help.

From the social constructionist perspective, facts may be discursively constructed, but there is a recognition that such construction arises from an intimate dialogical relationship between our embodied being in the world and how we discursively make sense of that embodied being and give it meaning. This is where the work of Vygotsky’s fellow countryman and contemporary, Mikhail Bakhtin, is useful [19],[20]. As far as we know,

Bakhtin and Vygotsky did not know each other, or know of each other’s work. However, their ideas do have much in common, such as the importance of language in shaping how we see and interpret the world around us. From a Bakhtinian position it is the relationship between things that is of primary interest. The “things” in question, whether they be individual humans, a person reading a text, or institutions interacting, derive their meaning from the relations, the intersubjectivity, that exists between them. In Bakhtin’s view, relationships are never static, they are dynamic, and either being made or unmade. This is why Bakhtin’s views have been summarised as dialogism. Meaning comes from the ongoing intersubjective dialogue that occurs in a dynamic relationship.

It is our view that people engage with their work environments and their colleagues in dialogical relationships. These relationships are complex. People bring to work relationships their personal histories. These, in turn, are the result of their embodied being in the world interacting with the ways in which they have discursively constructed their past experience. Professional education and experience are important aspects of these personal histories. These dialogical relationships, and the meanings they have for people, need to be researched in much more detail if we are to truly understand what happens when people engage with the world of work.

6. RESEARCHING THE INDIVIDUAL

It can be argued that there is a need for more research that explores this world of meaning that individuals bring to the world of work, and especially of what and how they learn there. Billett [21] points out that while concepts, such as communities of practice, are welcome and have moved our understanding forward, this seems to have come at the expense of the individual, and there has been a growing neglect of the role of the individual in the workplace. Billett argues that in some accounts of work, including those using either the notion of communities of practice or activity theory, the individuals’ contributions are underdeveloped. In discovering the importance of the social we seem to have forgotten the individual person.

In social constructionist terms, the dialogical relationship is suffering as the voice of the collective social is privileged over that of the individual. Instead of a dialogue we are in danger of having a monologue, where the only voice is that of the social. As Billett points out: “Beyond the pressure of the immediate social circumstance are the agency, intentionality and subjectivity of the learner” [21, p. 64]. The implication is that by adopting a purely social approach to studying learning in the workplace we risk ignoring the different meanings that different individuals will construct for themselves. It is unwise to assume that everyone will derive the same meanings in the same ways and in the same circumstances.

Mackenzie [22] uses the example of a motorist to highlight the contrast between the social and individual construction of a person. By obeying the rules of the road we discursively construct ourselves as motorists, but the rules of the road will not tell anyone why we are making a journey. This insight supports Billett's point that the distinctive subjectivity that individuals bring to the world of work is important and needs to be understood if we are to have any comprehensive understanding of what goes on in the workplace and its meaning for people [21]. To explore individual intentionality, agency and subjectivity we need an approach to research that will enable us to do so. Hermeneutic phenomenology and narrative inquiry are two approaches that can do this.

7. HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology is the study of a phenomenon via people's subjective experience of that phenomenon and hermeneutics is the study of interpretation. The combination, hermeneutic phenomenology, studies the interpretations people make of their experience. As noted earlier, hermeneutic phenomenology adopts the position that our epistemology arises from our ontology. This has profound implications for how knowledge is viewed. The difference between an epistemological and an ontological view of knowledge is the difference between "knowing an object and coming to an understanding with an interlocutor" [23, p. 127]. The latter is much more dialogical, and this is characteristic of this approach to knowledge. Although Gadamer spoke of interpretations of texts, hermeneutic phenomenology can engage in interpretation of anything that is meaningful to humans. These can include artifacts that humans produce and use, as well as the practices that humans engage in. Other human beings too can be meaningful and open to interpretation. It is sometimes convenient to speak of text-analogues in this context. Gadamer asserted that interpretation is a dialogue with the interpreter engaged in relating their own previous understanding to a text (or text-analogue) in a back and forth process which also involves a movement between the parts of a text and the whole until a new understanding emerges.

7.1 Hermeneutic Phenomenology in action

Benner [24] used hermeneutic phenomenology to study expertise in nursing. Using this approach she was able to produce rich descriptions of different levels and types of nursing expertise. These insights have proved to be useful to nurse educators seeking to develop educational programs that strongly encourage the development of expertise in students.

In our own research we have used hermeneutic phenomenology to investigate how medical students and health professionals learn and use the various skills of clinical reasoning to deal with the myriad problems that patients bring to a clinical encounter [25]. This approach allowed us to explore the complexities of the

relationships that people develop with their workplace, and how the workplace, in turn, affects them.

The ontological nature of becoming and being a health professional clearly emerged in the findings. For example, one medical student spoke of going to see a patient whom she instantly saw had "glaring cardiac signs" [25, p. 199]. In other words, the ability to recognise these particular signs of heart disease had now become a part of who and what she was. She could not stop herself from seeing that the patient had heart disease, even if she had wanted to. This aspect of the "naming and framing" described by Schön [12] was now a part of her ontology. By engaging with the world of practice she had now embodied this particular ability and was a different person because of it. In Vygotsky's terms the ability to recognise cardiac signs was a tool this student had internalised and was able to use to help her do the job of assessing patients; but the tool itself had now worked reflexively and changed her forever.

Another arm of this same study looked at the health professionals in a multidisciplinary pain clinic dealing mostly with patients suffering chronic pain. It emerged that one of the great strengths of this clinic was the way in which the staff successfully managed a dialogical relationship between two quite different ways of viewing healthcare. One view was to regard healthcare as concerned exclusively with definitive cure (a biomedical view) and the other was to regard healthcare as functional. The latter meant that if definitive cure was not possible then improving lifestyle in some way was seen as sufficient. The physiotherapists and psychologists in this clinic mostly favoured a functional view, realising that the vast majority of patients in the clinic could not be definitively cured. The doctors, however, favoured the more biomedical view, even though they acknowledged the reality that most of the patients could not be cured. As one doctor said:

"that's the medical job to decide ... is it appropriate to purely view this patient as a functional problem? ... you have to recognise that you are probably the sole ... person in that group who ... has the obligation ... to go and do that for the patient and chase the diagnosis".[25, p.148].

Despite occasional pressure to adopt a more functional view by their colleagues, the doctors felt they owed it to the patients to search for a biomedical cure. This is a good example of a dialogical relationship. Neither viewpoint (biomedical or functional) would be a completely adequate model on its own, but by sustaining both together in a delicate balance, the clinic staff were able to work in an environment that arguably offered the best possible care available to the unfortunate patients. This dialogical relationship between the two viewpoints was something that most individuals working in the clinic were aware of and had internalised. A research approach based within hermeneutic phenomenology allowed this dialogical relationship to emerge and to be articulated.

7.2 Being Critical

However, it is important to be aware that there are critiques of approaches such as hermeneutic phenomenology that cannot be ignored. Ratner [26] and Gergen [17] have both complained that hermeneutics and phenomenology, in their original form, place too much attention on the individual and they call for these approaches to be informed by social theories of practice and learning. They can still be used, but the focus of attention should not be the individual, rather it should be the individual in social context. By combining hermeneutics and phenomenology with approaches such as narrative inquiry it is possible to draw out the dialogical relationship between the individual and their context.

8. NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Narrative inquiry examines the meanings of the stories that humans tell about themselves and the stories they attempt to live out. It can be argued that humans are deeply narrative creatures, constantly telling and listening to stories, especially the stories they apply to themselves [27]. Many professional practices are intimately concerned with such stories. In healthcare settings patients tell stories about their problems which doctors then reinterpret within the discourse of medicine. For example, a patient might tell a story of progressively worsening weakness which might be reinterpreted by a doctor as a story of diabetes. Such stories form the foundation of medical practice. The advantage of the doctor's reinterpreted story is that it allows decisions to be made that will affect the narrative trajectory into the future. Many professions require high level narrative skills of their practitioners. This is because a large part of professional activity is about making decisions, and the quality of the decisions made are dependent, in turn, on the quality of the stories that underpin them.

However, the doctors themselves will be living out their own life stories. A typical narrative plot for a doctor might be one that started with a desire to help others in childhood, this led in turn to medical school, and on to further professional training. The future narrative trajectory might lead to eventual recognition and status as a consultant. This professional narrative is likely to be combined with other personal narratives, such as being someone's son or daughter, husband or wife, mother or father. Narrative inquiry would seek to draw out these stories, to describe and analyse features such as the narrative trajectory and the relationships among the characters who play significant roles in each story.

Narrative inquiry recognises that each story can have several layers of meaning and that there are interactions between the different stories we live out. Personal narratives interact with professional narratives in complex ways. Agency, intentionality and subjectivity are combined in the stories we live out, and narrative inquiry permits us to engage with these various aspects of individual subjectivity and draw out their meaning.

Going back to Bakhtin, there are complex dialogical relationships being enacted between our personal and professional narratives that affect how we live out our working lives.

A vivid example of this narrative interaction emerged in our research. One medical student had been an infantry officer before studying medicine. He believed that his previous military experience could be easily adapted to a medical setting. He had this to say about communicating with patients.

"They're not too different really. The art of military communication and the art of medical communication are bound up in dealing with people in extreme circumstances, and whether ... you're talking to someone who is facing cancer as an ultimate battle in their life or you're talking to a soldier who's facing ... an actual battle the principles are the same." [25, 168-169]

Whatever we may feel about this student's perspective on communicating with patients, the point is that the narrative inquiry approach encouraged him to tell his stories. His stories of his life in the army and his life as a medical student were interacting in ways that were meaningful to him. At the same time this is a good example of using hermeneutic phenomenology. Phenomenologically, the student was telling his story of how he experienced the phenomenon of being a medical student. The hermeneutic aspect is that he was encouraged to reflect on this experience and share his interpretation of it.

In the other arm of the study described above, an Australian doctor related how he had been educated after graduation in Chinese acupuncture. He told the story of his experience of being a student in China and his attempts at trying to make sense of the Traditional Chinese Medicine that he and other Westerners were being taught.

"We would sometimes discuss these issues 'cause I guess we were coming from a similar background, and our constant frustration was trying to fit the traditional Chinese theory into a Western model. ... your automatic reaction ... was to try to transpose almost one diagnosis and try to work out what that was in a Western diagnosis. And I think, about the end of 12 months, we all came to the same conclusion, was that you just couldn't ... do it. ... there is just no link between the two". [25, p. 205]

An interesting point here is that the Western and Chinese models of healthcare can be seen as master narratives, from quite different cultures, providing a framework for practitioners to work within. In this case there was little point of contact between the two master narratives, and the individual practitioner had to step completely from one to the other. Dialogically, this is an example in which there is little meaningful connection between the two.

9. CONCLUSION

Combining hermeneutic phenomenology with narrative inquiry can be seen as an example of the brokering between different communities of practice advocated by Wenger [11]. The two approaches to research complement each other. They have much in common, but have quite different emphases. By using both together it is possible to draw out the richness of the subjectivity that individuals bring to their interpretations of their own workplaces. There is a delicate dialogical tension between the social and the individual. The modern workplace with its frequently complex mixture of opportunities, pressures, mundane activity and challenges offers us a remarkable setting for exploring this balance. For newcomers, learning to interact with the workplace, the challenges and novelty will predominate. How people respond to learning in workplace settings will vary enormously depending on the different subjectivities they bring to the interaction. If we really wish to understand how to maximise the learning that can occur then we need to explore the complex subjectivity that people bring to the work setting.

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