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Managing dissonances between worlds: Constructive debate spaces as enabling learning tools

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In memory of Crimilda Chust, with whom we conducted the field research reported here.

1. Learning through apprenticeship

Learning through apprenticeship necessitates the interaction between three worlds (Béguin, 2007): the world of the apprentice training center (ATC) that provides formal training, the world of the company in which the apprentice works, the world of the apprentice himself/herself. The apprentice navigates in and between these three worlds (Veillard, 2012). The first two worlds mobilize different goals, different norms, and different forms of knowledge. The goal of the ATC is epistemic and implements a didactic strategy. The company is driven by production goals and efficiency criteria.

In theory, these discrepancies are not necessarily a problem. On the contrary, the two environments provide different and complementary learning spaces (Mayen & Olry, 2012). In the company, apprentices acquire gestural skills and develop their professional identity. In the ATC, they gain general conceptual knowledge and company-independent methods and techniques.

However, observations show that this may cause difficulties to the apprentice, torn between different, sometimes contradictory, demands. This is all the more difficult when the worlds do not communicate, a quite frequent situation: teachers and company tutors seldom interact, and apprentices cannot do much to establish interactions between them.

2. Origin and goal of this action research

The results of a first study showed that learning, in a vocational training context, takes place within a three-party setting involving the ATC, the apprentice and the work tutor, with little or no contact between the professors and the tutor (Chust-Demay, Mollo & Falzon, 2018). The organization and the operating logics of the ATC and of the company rest on different, sometimes contradictory, practices, goals and temporalities. For instance, the techniques taught at the ATC may differ from those applied (and requested) in the company:

« We follow the technical standards, but some of them haven't changed for ten years. While companies track technological changes. » (Professor)

« In the plumbing class, they are taught how to work with copper, while companies no longer use it, they use PVC » (Pedagogical coordinator, ATC)

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There are several other factors of diversity and specificity: between apprentices, companies, work situations (worksites, clients), company practices. This also concerns variations within a given company: techniques may vary across professionals, or across contexts:

« I will teach a given technique, someone else will teach another technique. And this is precisely the way in which one progresses. Even between us professionals: I would do things in this way, someone else would do it in that way. » (Company tutor)

« What apprentices are taught at the ATC and what we show them, it is quite different. In reality, installing a simple igniter is not doing this, then this, etc. There are 50 ways to install a simple igniter. » (Company tutor)

From the apprentice standpoint, this diversity means constant adaptations. These adaptations are part of the learning process, and go beyond the mere acquisition of technical skills. However, the lack of communication between worlds make it difficult for apprentices to voice and share these adaptations. The attempts for facilitating exchanges between worlds (e.g. apprentice's booklet, information meetings) do not actually work. The burden of the contradictions rests on the apprentice's shoulders, and the possibilities for him or her to cope with them are limited and may even be detrimental. It may even lead to breakdowns and to leaving the training program.

These results have led us to experiment spaces of across-worlds debate (SAWDs) allowing apprentices to voice and discuss their work experiences. SAWDs build on the constructive conflict model proposed by Mary Parker Follett, briefly presented below.

3. The constructive conflict

The constructive conflict model was developed by Mary Parker Follett in order to advocate the importance of diversity within organizations and to promote the debate on diversity. Her main book on the subject, *Creative experience*, was published in 1924: the “debate in organizations” topic is not new... The book encourages « diversity, innovative and creative experimentation, the increase of the contributions of humans in society by integrating their desires, their competencies, their imagination » (Follett, 2002, p.37; our translation). For her, diversity is unavoidable, so that it needs to be managed in such a way that it helps people instead of hindering or bothering them.

“What people often mean by getting rid of conflict is getting rid of diversity, and it is of the utmost importance that these should not be considered the same. We may wish to abolish conflict but we cannot get rid of diversity. We must face life as it is and understand that diversity is its more important feature (...) but fear of difference is dread of life itself. It is possible to conceive conflict as not necessarily a wasteful outbreak of incompatibilities, but a normal process by which socially valuable differences register themselves for the enrichment of all concerned” (Follett, 1924, p.300).

The concept of constructive conflict allows one “to break out of the conflict between a priori incompatible views in order to find, in a creative way, a new position that integrates the two views and thus fully satisfies both parties” (Fiol, 2005, our translation).

Follett differentiates the constructive conflict from the domination or the compromise, the two latter resting on an organizational paradigm grounded in competition:

- domination is a way to process diversity in which « the stronger imposes their view on the other, or the weaker bends in front the will of the stronger » (Mousli, 2000, our translation). This process is quick but dangerous since it neglects diversity and does not actually resolve the conflict; on the contrary it may set the stage for future conflicts.
- the compromise is a more frequent process: each party has given in in some way, has left aside part of their desires, of their ambitions, in order to reach a solution. But actually each

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party is unhappy: less has been obtained (Mousli, 2000). For Follett, compromises are temporary and futile: the disagreement will re-emerge one day or the other about the same topic, for the same reasons, possibly in an aggravated way. It cannot improve the quality of social interactions.

The constructive conflict model rests on an organizational paradigm based on cooperation. It can be defined as “an harmonious association of differences that, as the nut and the screw or the parts of a clock, gather in a way that results in a new form, a new entity, a new result, made from the past differences yet different from them” (Fox, 1968, in Berman & Van Buren, 2015). As opposed to the compromise, that brings nothing new, integration needs invention (Metcalf & Urwick, 1941, in Mousli, 2005), a “creative intelligence” (Follett, 1924). “The conflict is constructive when no party sacrifices their interest or their values; nothing is left aside, much is gained. [...] The integration or the constructive conflict is not a one-time result, but a learning process to be cultivated and maintained, the ability to leave the narrow frame of the compromise between two viewpoints and search for a new integrated viewpoint” (Fiol, 2005). As a matter of fact, the dynamic nature of situations, their variability, bring new differences that may lead to new conflicts. When a new conflict appears, it will concern a different issue, while, in domination or compromise strategies, the triggering issue endures.

According to Follett, a fundamental condition for a real integration is its anchoring in reality and in action. Debates should start from an accurate picture of reality, and they should result in actual changes in reality. Follett insists on the idea of experimenting and of checking that integration is in line with the culture and the organization of the company.

4. Conflict constructivization : designing and experimenting SAWDs

We have attempted to implement Follett’s constructive model in the training situation described above. This situation differs from the situations Follett had in mind. First it addresses a learning situation involving courses in a school and work in a company, whereas Follett was focusing on work only. Second, the debate spaces we implemented address conflicts across different worlds (ATC and company) and not conflicts within a company.

4.1. Method

The spaces of across-worlds debate (SAWDs) were fueled by videos of the actual activity of apprentices in the company where they worked. This was done for two methodological reasons. The first reason is that debates should deal with work as done in reality in order to avoid the risks of drifting towards general assertions regarding work or the life of the organization (Mollo & Nascimento, 2013 ; Rocha, Mollo & Daniellou, 2017). This allows participants to explain and compare their work experience. These explanations and comparisons may transform the way in which they understand situations, leading to changes in behavior.

The second reason is that videos have allowed us to transform apprentices’ experiences at work into learning situations within the vocational school.

Video sequences were presented to the class during training sessions, with the agreement of apprentices and work tutors who had been filmed, and with the agreement of ATC personnel (professors and management). The goal was to remove barriers between worlds by bringing work-as-done within the ATC, so that work-as-done could become a learning engine facilitating verbalization, explicitation and exchanges regarding work situations experienced by the apprentices (Laberge *et al.*, 2014, 2022).

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On the apprentices' side, our goal was to offer a space for expressing their good or bad experiences and to set them as actors of their own learning, able to analyze, act, and transform work and learning situations. The videos provided an opportunity to discover the situations of the other apprentices and discuss their difficulties and the way they coped with them.

On the trainers' side, our goal was to make them better aware of the situations met by apprentices and to provide opportunities for them to include the videos as pedagogical materials beyond the formal training.

Sessions were co-facilitated by the HFE professional and by the trainer of the concerned domain. The objective was to train trainers to another form of coaching focused on listening attentively and with sympathy to the apprentices' expression.

The SAWDs were a way to experiment enabling learning situations which would allow apprentices to develop new competencies and skills, increase their possibilities of action, preserve their health, foster their professional insertion (Delgoulet & Vidal-Gomel, 2014; Falzon, 2014). Six classes from four different professional domains (butchery, hairdressing, masonry and mechanics) participated in the SAWDs. Each class followed 3 to 4 SAWD sessions, each session lasting about 1 hour. Results will focus on the sessions with hairdressing apprentices.

4.2. Results

Debate spaces break down the barriers between the worlds and are beneficial for both apprentices and trainers.

4.2.1. Benefits to apprentices

SAWDs encourage the description of and debates about the diversity of learning/working situations. Gestures and techniques, work organization, relationships with the salon tutor and with the other employees are discussed. Discussions contribute to a shared representation of the trade and of its diversity.

Videos trigger interactions in which difficulties, deviations, contradictions, gaps or discrepancies between work and ATC requirements are shared and discussed. They also allow apprentices to state how they cope with the situations, the initiatives they took, the tricks they imagined.

The mere fact of being able to state goal conflicts, within the class context, is in itself a contribution to health (Caroly, 2010). Discussions allow apprentices to realize that others also experience difficulties. This provides a significant social and emotional support.

Sharing strategies contributes to the emergence of new possibilities of action that allow apprentices to get out of some deadlocks. These new possibilities of action are not limited to technical skills: they concern many facets of the apprentices' work (time pressure, relationships with the work tutor and the colleagues, secondary tasks, etc.).

SWADs may be considered as constructive spaces contributing to professional development of apprentices and setting them as actors of their own learning.

4.2.1. Benefits to tutors

SAWDs allow tutors to watch their trainees in a different perspective, as actors in the work situation. They gain a better understanding of the experience of the apprentices at work, in terms of difficulties they met or initiatives they take, and of gaps between the functioning of the ATC and of the company. They also may take advantage of the video clips in order to further explain some elements of the course or bring additional knowledge.

Lastly, some interventions of the trainers clearly show their empathy and positive attitude regarding what happens in the work situation. This behavior is a strong support for trainees, who feel their difficulties are understood and taken into account.

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5. Discussion-conclusion

This research shows that SAWDs contribute to helping both the apprentices and the trainer and transform the learning situation, both within the ATC and in the company context. Difficulties and contradictions experienced by the trainees become resources for the training, instead of being handicaps.

These results are similar to those of previous studies conducted in work environment (Mollo & Falzon, 2008 ; Rocha *et al.*, 2015, 2019). They show the importance and efficiency of constructive debates based on the diversity of work activities. In the present case, the existence of three distinct worlds (of the company, of the ATC, of the apprentices) with little contact between them is an obstacle. SAWDs help in making them an asset.

This experiment makes it possible to state the necessary success conditions for the SAWDs, in order for them to become an enabling learning environment: importance of actual activity as a basis for discussion (videos, as in this example, or photos, work stories, etc.), rules of democratic collective functioning (attentive listening, symmetric relations between all participants). However, the action research has certain limitations. A first limitation is that it was not possible to involve the companies tutors in the SAWDs. Because of their status as business leaders, it is difficult for them to free up time to meet with apprentices and teachers, as this time is not paid. The possibility of organizing SAWDs bringing together students and professionals from both companies and the ATC remains a prospect so that possibilities of acting on the organization of learning can emerge. A second limitation concerns the absence of institutional representatives in our approach. We met several representatives to whom we presented the objectives of the research, but we were unable to set up a monitoring committee for the process. The involvement of these institutions is necessary: they can allocate the resources needed for supporting a learning environment favoring the meeting of the worlds.

In line with our research, we consider that an enabling (work or learning) environment “contributes to the continuous development of people agency. It supports the diversity of the forms of carrying out the activity, preserves the existing spaces for debating this diversity, even integrating the debating of activities into its daily functioning as an activity necessary for the sustainability of organizations” (Mollo, 2022).

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