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Caught in the Storm: Power and Control in a Union/Management Training Program

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Keywords: workplace educator, working class, cultural historical activity theory, power, worker struggle

Abstract: This study investigated how a workplace educator was used as a pawn between the company and the union while delivering a safety-training program. Among the findings were training was held in contempt by union and management while safety's exchange value was exploited.

During the summer months, the continuous caster's shop floor temperature rose beyond 110° F. Further, workers were required to don full personal protective equipment (PPE) as well as flame-retardant, heat-reflective apparel. The elevated temperature work-environment caused several workers to experience heat stress related symptoms with several transported to the local emergency room. Since the caster is a 24/7 operation manned by a production crew whose number was informed by the current Basic Labor Agreement, extended breaks in an air-conditioned environment each hour were not possible. Two plans to address the issue were proposed. The union wanted one additional Spellman per shift during the summer months thus providing the workers sufficient relief from the heat. The company countered with providing body-cooling apparel to be worn under the required PPE accompanied by elevated-temperature work environment safety training as well as a mobile air conditioning unit at each of the two production operator's station.

Worthen (2008) argues, "Workers learn not only how to produce goods and services but also how to protect their jobs and themselves on the job so that they can earn a living" (p. 323). This is part of the micro-social processes that serve to create people's knowledge as the shop floor is a "contested terrain of social, political and economic struggle" (Bratton, Mills, Pyrch, & Sawchuk, 2004, p. 103). Although the heat stress issue and its toll on worker health and safety was forefront, were union-driven hidden agendas present that came to bear on this struggle? The battle for worker-voice in protecting themselves, as well as their job, is disputed in a space where the subordinate standpoint that, many times, is subjugated within the dominant social group (the company, in this case). Were company-driven hidden agendas also present that served to fuel the contested terrain for power?

Sawchuk (2003) argued, "... but more important, it [participation in activity] offers an example of the way that standpoints play such an important role in differentiated and differentiating forms of participation in activity" (p. 126). It is these differentiated and differentiating forms of participation that occur daily within the workplace and beyond as workers struggle for voice and agency vis-à-vis control of their work-environment. This space is governed by the dominant group's privileged knowledge manifesting in such forms as labor agreements, corporate policy, and human resource development practices. Existing simultaneously in the same space, the subordinate groups experience historically defined differentiated roles thus socially creating a people's knowledge that includes their need to maintain a voice in the struggle for relevance, power, and control. Power and control becomes

the focus as the dominant group differentiates each subordinate's extent of participation in the activity network. However, this does not relegate the subordinate group to one of passive or obedient submission of agency.

Brattan et al. (2004) claimed, "learning is part of a management strategy to achieve sustainable competitive advantage" (p. 11). Nora (1990) stated management has the responsibility to train their employees and provide them with every opportunity to succeed. Especially in a globalized market place, the drive towards lowering the per-ton cost is imperative to sustain the competitive advantage. Instruction tends to be informed by observed and perceived deficiencies presented by the workers and described as an identified skill-gap. In turn, training is planned and delivered attempting to address and resolve the skill-gap thus increasing crew efficiency and lowering production costs. The specific training that the worker attends is documented in their file.

However, others maintain that training is conducted for ulterior motives and is little discussed or even mentioned. Schied (1995) argued that management developed ways to shape and control workers as well as the work. It is this continued battle for controlling the work process, or having a hearable voice in directing the work process, that becomes the source for social, political, and economic contention. These hidden motives lie just below the visible surface sustaining status quo and workplace control through maintaining worker complicity. It is this intersection of two competing agendas where the workplace educator negotiates their role.

Cultural Historical Activity Theory

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) was selected for this study for its ability to provide consideration for the historicity and multivoicedness issues located in an activity as well as its ability to explore contradictions. A sophisticated theory was needed to wade through the myriad power and control issues located at not only the visible level but, more importantly, at the invisible level as well as the historical relations in the divisions of labor. What was needed was the ability to identify the outcomes of a combined object implicated by internal and external disturbances. Motivation provides the impetus of a group or an individual to participate in an object-oriented activity. It is beyond this paper to offer a full description regarding CHAT as many insightful and comprehensive resources exist [see for instance (Roth & Lee, 2007; Sawchuk, Duarte, & Elhammoumi, 2005)].

Leont'ev (1978) argued that "Activity is the minimal meaningful context for understanding individual actions ... (p. 10). This study explored power and control issues in a safety training program from the workplace educator's safety training activity system. This unit of analysis was used while exploring the activity network that also included the management's safety program and the union's safety program. CHAT was also used for its ability to explore contradictions, structural disturbances, such as what the workplace educator faced when required to do their job. Additionally, other principles such as multivoicedness come very clear as the activity network was explored and analyzed.

Findings and Discussion

Safety training's use value strengthens workers' work process knowledge thus increasing their ability to recognize potential environmental hazards and improved opportunity to safely return home. Workers are then better positioned to externalize upon the environment to not only negotiate their jobs for maintaining low per-ton-cost; but, also to recognize and address unexpected situations that may contribute to safety-compromised encounters. It is fully

understood that workers should return home as healthy as they entered (Worthen, 2014). However, when such a belief is turned for uses other than directed, such as using the concepts of safety as a means to running an agenda, then the idea of safety, in and of itself, may become compromised in addition to the one providing the specific safety training.

The findings illustrated several interesting points. One, and presumably most important, was the workplace educator drew upon proper pedagogical practices to deliver heat stress training. The data analysis showed through formal document analysis that the training program was informed by the standards and recommendations provided by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA, <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/heatstress/>) and the National Institute for Safety and Occupational Health (NIOSH, <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/climate/default.html>), the two governing organizations regarding occupational health and safety. Additionally, the workplace educator showed a teaching video (*Working Safely in Elevated Temperature Environments*) along with an interactive presentation that engaged the participants in recognizing signs and symptoms related to heat stress. As one union worker stated, “What I learned I can [original] use at home and for my family.” This as well as many similar statements all pointed to the workers learning how to safely negotiate their role in an elevated temperature environment. One manager stated, “I know I feel better prepared to help my crew during hot days.” These are part of the intended outcomes of the training program.

However, and just as important, a few additional points surfaced that had little to do with delivering instruction. The data analysis also yielded 1) the workplace educator became a pawn in a power struggle; 2) Workers held training in contempt; 3) the workplace educator was viewed as an outsider by both union and management; and, 4) safety was used in its exchange value for power and control. The workplace educator faced a primary contradiction related to safety training. As the workplace educator said, “I have conducted safety training many times and this was one time that the company should have thought of the hazard and not how to skate with minimal cost.” Their knowledge for producing a service informed how they developed and delivered the heat stress training. They stated, “I felt bad for the operators in such intense heat...” However, the educator also learned how to protect their job as well as protecting themselves while negotiating their role. They further stated, “I thought if I could at least, uhhh, be compassionate about the heat, they would understand I have a job to do.” The workplace educator needed to perform their job expectations as an employee however; they openly stated their positionality upfront to the union workers.

The union was requesting that one additional utility person be added to each shift during the summer months as a way to meet the OSHA and NIOSH guidelines during times of elevated temperature work environments. Specifically, the use of “relief workers or assign extra workers for physically demanding jobs” (<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/heatstress/>). This general sentiment was in concert with what safety’s purpose (use value) professes. The union had lost one worker per shift from the time when the caster was first commissioned. As one union worker stated, “they [the company] wanted to find anyway they could to cut our workforce and they did a while back – something about there were too many with too little to do. This is not what they said in their original setup for us in the caster.” Although this additional utility person would not have been a year-round assignment, it would provide relief to the current production crews allowing the operators an extended break in an air-conditioned environment with cool drinking water. When all operators were finished with their breaks, the utility person would take their break then provide labor duties as assigned.

The company optioned for providing cooling apparel for each operator. This was a viable option since the general clause stated that when engineering or administrative controls were not feasible, the option for safety apparel (PPE) was sufficient. As one manager said, "The cooling gear works very well. I wore one the other day and I was quite comfortable. I don't know why they [the workers] are complaining." A further consideration was contract negotiations were beginning later in the year. As another manager stated, "this extra person per shift is not something we want permanent and for them [the union] to win in arbitration." However, the managers never donned the reflective apparel required for working around molten metal nor did they spend any considerable time near the operating stations. As a union worker stated, "Of course they would be comfortable, they don't do anything but stand around. Now they're bringing this training person to sell us on why this cooling crap is better for us." Although the union expressed no hatred towards the workplace educator as a person, they were very resentful and untrusting for the workplace educator position since, in their terms, was a "typical daylight white hat with no real purpose."

The series of heat stress training programs were very volatile during their delivery. Several union members maintained their hostility against the training program and were quite vocal. As one said, "This is just another way the company can squeeze us for higher profits." The workplace educator addressed the training program participants through a cautious but earnest demeanor. As they had stated, "I will not show that I am fearful and I will do my job. I feel bad for the workers but I do not make policy. I was actually physically threatened several times." There were hostile actions from time-to-time during the training in the form of thrown coffee cups to pounding fists on the table. The workplace educator spent significant energy to maintain pedagogically sound instruction although was interrupted several times. As the training programs evolved, managers begin demonstrating hostile demeanors towards the workplace educator as well. As one manager said, "This training person has no clue how to run a production unit. Just do the training and shut up." A different manager expressed, "With this trainer doing the heat stress training, we are well within our rights and responsibilities towards the workers. Just ask OSHA."

The workplace educator was caught in a contradictory position between these two entities with a long contentious history. They were forced to inward reflection between love of the job and the workers to doing their job in accordance with their employer and their job description. And although the educator maintained a professional demeanor throughout this training program, they were subjected to hostile treatment from both sides. A manager had said, "Trainers are a necessary evil these days. We have too much to do and considerable accountability exists in maintaining documents for reporting purposes, so we bring them [the workplace educator] here to do a specific job and leave." Conversely, one union person stated, "This trainer doesn't care about us. They are paid by the company to keep us in our place." Another union worker said, "If the company would just practice what they preach to us about how safety comes first, these issues would very rarely pop-up." A different union worker stated, "The company doesn't care about us, they never did. If we get injured or die, they'll just replace us and keep going." These quotes represented the overall attitude of the production crew regarding their fight to returning one union member with a very important job even if for a few months. These statements align with Sawchuk's observation regarding the evisceration of the working class. In many ways, the union workers were trying to maintain their voice at the table but were concerned for their workers' health. They chose to use a safety exchange value but were quickly defeated since the company owned the power for policy development and adjudication and had demonstrated that

they had met their responsibility to provide a safe work environment. The surfacing issue was the workplace educator was caught in this storm where they were isolated with no representation and forced to conduct a training program they knew to be a quick fix for a more serious problem. A union worker stated, "I am not a business person with a degree, but what will be the cost of all this cooling stuff as opposed to bringing on an extra person per shift for the summer." His statement made sense but the data showed no investigation related to this.

Conclusion

Worthen (2014) discussed *safety culture* and how its visibility became clear and the role it plays in the workplace. She defines safety culture as "an approach to safety management that looks at attitudes and behaviors. It establishes a unit of analysis that does not include the physical plant, the actual machines or equipment that the workers have to work with" (p. 185). Safety in this study was not related to the machines. However, it did include the workers' attitudes and behaviors with a management decision to address heat stress and its effects on worker health and safety. At management's direction, the administrative control of an extra worker per shift during the summer months was rejected due to feasibility in favor of the workers donning PPE adding to an existing two layers. The workplace educator had a contradiction between being required to provide the required training and their feeling that more should be done to mitigate the elevated temperature work environment. They also faced the contradiction of performing their job but not being trusted, and an outright hostile experience, by union of management. They learned through this experience how to negotiate their standpoint and protecting their job and their personal safety so as to return home.

Management has the dominant voice and the union continues the fight to maintain a viable voice at the bargaining table as well as for control over the work process. As the union worker just above alluded to, management had the option to properly practice safety in the sense of providing the environment conducive to and supportive of safety-oriented, workplace practices. However, they opted for the choice of putting the onus on the workers through adding additional cumbersome personal protective equipment. The issue was the workers' attitudes and behaviors with being encumbered with an additional layer of PPE when other viable options were present. The workplace educator now becomes firmly entrenched in the storm as the fulcrum over which each side battles.

Worthen also discusses the idea of knowledge for production and knowledge for negotiation. Supporting her discussion was Sawchuk's (2003) argument regarding standpoints and their role when participating in an activity. The specific standpoints become key when investigating differentiated and differentiating forms of learning especially when considered against the historicity of union/management environments. The workplace educator, even though an integral part of the company, became a pawn used by both union and management and their respective agendas. The educator maintained their focus to deliver a pedagogically sound training program as provided under knowledge production for goods or services. However, as this study shows, they also had knowledge for negotiation. Even though they were held in contempt by both the union and management, they negotiated their own safety by weathering the storm through open and honest dialogue. Through stating their standpoint upfront as a workplace educator employed to do a job, the position was one of contempt but they, as a person, were accepted for their honesty and their focus on what they could only control and that being heat stress training.

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