Contrary to popular myth, modern prison environments are often workplaces that embrace change and reform. When an innovative model for offender rehabilitation at a corrections centre requires staff to work differently as an inter-professional care team, new ways of learning to work in the overlaps emerge. Using a qualitative case study approach to investigate daily work and crucial incidents that act as change triggers, we discuss how this group experience has challenged individual and group work roles and changed organizational work practices. Our findings suggest a useful nexus of theories of workplace learning with theories of organizational change and development. The emergent quality of human interactions supports the concept of collective competence (Boreham 2004, 2007) rather than the comfort of individual competence. Enhanced understandings of collective learning as relationally-constructed and actively improvised with others argue for a new vocabulary of competence in which more interdisciplinary research can add further insights.

Keywords: competence, organizational change; workplace learning; multi-disciplinary teams; relationality

This paper describes and assesses the significance of the informal workplace learning experiences of staff during the first year of implementation of an innovative offender rehabilitation programme. The programme features various innovations, including a radical new model for treating convicted drug offenders (new kinds of work); staff required to work as a multi-disciplinary team to deliver inter-professional care, thereby challenging long-embedded individual and group work roles (new ways of working)’ and dynamically-designed organizational work practices that emerge from pragmatic and creative interactions (procedures emerge as work proceeds).

The original research aim was to investigate the main kinds of learning that resulted from staff being required to engage in novel work, as part of unfamiliar teams, and in a fluid and challenging context. This case study was one of eight that was designed to test and refine, employing MacIntyre’s (1981) account of a practice, a previously proposed theory of productive learning at work. This theory (Beckett and Hager 2002; Hager and Halliday 2006) views such productive informal learning from work as a growing capacity to make contextual-sensitive judgements – a discretionary and discriminating process that involves holistic and embodied knowing. However, it is not the task of this paper to report on the findings of this overall project. Rather we will focus on the seemingly rich examples of collective learning that were the main feature of this particular case study.

Once the concept of collective learning is fore-grounded, further questions immediately arise about notions of collective competence. Existing notions of competence tend to centre on individual skills and attributes. This focus on individuals shapes how diverse literatures have portrayed competence: education literature typically addresses teaching and assessment of individual skills and attributes; Human Resource Development (HRD) literature has been concerned with identifying, developing and certifying such individual

* Corresponding author. Email: paul.hager@uts.edu.au
skills and attributes, as well as their application in practice; while the focus of much workplace learning literature has been on how the experience of practice develops and enhances these individual skills and attributes. In our view, these emphases on the individual have not adequately addressed the contextual, collective and time/change dimensions of actual practice. As will be argued later, it is in this respect that the findings from this particular case study have something to offer.

In drawing attention to the topic of collective competence, this paper seeks to add to the literature on competence whilst pointing to fruitful connections across HRD, Organizational Change (OC), Organizational Development (OD) and learning literatures. We argue that these fields have too often developed as separate domains, but each has distinctive concepts that can be useful for each other. A recognition of the importance of attempting to synthesize these diverse literatures is evident in Garavan and McCarthy (2008), which proposes a four-quadrant typology of collective learning processes, based on the three dimensions of cognitive/behavioral, individual-within-collective/collective-as-a-totality, and prescriptive-normative/explanatory-descriptive. While it is not the purpose of the present paper to develop a taxonomy of collective competence, this case study of learning under a destabilizing environment of rapid organizational change has alerted us to the need to take account of both individual and collective aspects of competence. In particular, participants do not lose their own individual identity or agency when they learn together with others; rather we suggest they engage in relational responsive ways (Cunliffe 2008) in integrating work with learning. Thus the polar opposites of Garavan and McCarthy’s (2008) typology should not be read as suggesting either one or the other. Both are crucial in how actors interpret their contextual work situation as a whole.

Thus, the particular purpose of this paper is to suggest and to illustrate, through discussion of the empirical findings about learning in this case study, that theories of HRD, OC and OD and theories of workplace learning can provide useful insights for each other’s respective domains, signalling a possible convergence and recognition of the intimate connection between learning and development.

We begin by describing the context of the drug offender treatment programme and the research methodology used to produce this case study. Next, we highlight how the staff are being challenged by working outside the boundaries of traditional roles and competencies and what this implies for their understandings of learning and identity within a chaotic yet creative operating environment. Finally, in the discussion of these findings, we examine their implications for a nexus of selected theories of workplace learning and theories of organizational change and development. We suggest some conclusions about situations like this, where multi-disciplinary teams are formed, employing individuals who must draw from disciplinary competencies and also learn to connect and enhance their expertise in novel holistic ways.

Case study: a new model of therapeutic jurisprudence

The drug offender treatment program at the corrections centre (we use the pseudonym Program) that constitutes this case study is a pilot endeavour among various stakeholders, including judiciary, corrective services and health authorities. The humanistic concept of therapeutic jurisprudence (Wexler and Winick 1991) suggests that the law should be positive or neutral, not punitive, with respect to individuals in society. The desire to operationalize this concept as a rehabilitation framework is the basis for the design and implementation of this programme. Program is structured as a three-stage progressive model with offenders being initially incarcerated to focus on cognitive and behavioural therapies that encourage pro-social behaviours and improved states of psychological well-being. They then move onto later stages that create possibilities to be partially and then fully located in the community with supervisory monitoring.

A significant point of differentiation is the desire by the centre director to adopt a systemic and organization-wide perspective to change. This means not only addressing offenders’ cognitive and behavioural predispositions at an individual level, but also their surrounding organizational climate as shaped...
by interactions with staff at the centre. Over forty staff work at the centre, including alcohol and drug counsellors, psychotherapists, probation and parole officers, education officers (collectively known as programmes staff), custodial officers and medical practitioners. Staff contribute their professional expertise, working in new structures (e.g. the weekly integration meeting) and as a multi-disciplinary team in joint interactions with offenders and by co-facilitating activities. Thus staff operate in quite different working and learning modes than at other correctional centres or gaols, where functions are distinct and coordinated. This case study focused only on the work and learning of staff, not on that of the offenders.

Research methodology

As part of a broader research programme on workplace learning, we have been examining how practitioners make judgements and decisions in specific challenging incidents or initiatives within their organizations. We have focused on understanding the nature of the learning that emerges from the conduct of work required for organizational outcomes; work that is sometimes performed individually, but most often with others. Such informal learning (Hager and Halliday 2006) contrasts in significant ways with more structured forms of learning that occur in formal education or training. Our investigation has employed case studies as a qualitative research approach that seeks to do justice to the complexity of social interactions rather than attempting to simplify social phenomena (Peshkin 1988). Within qualitative research, case study methodology provides ways to surface ‘comprehensive, systematic and in-depth information about each case of interest’ (Patton 2002, 447) because ‘the purpose of the case study is not to represent the world, but to represent the case … both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning’ (Stake 2000, 237, 245). This focus on particularity allows a depth and richness of ‘thick description’ (Ryle as cited by Geertz 1973, 6) and interpretation based on the experiences of participants, while also further situating such experiences within local contextual factors.

In constructing this case study we used a mix of qualitative data collection methods. Employing ‘multiple methods, or triangulation, is an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question’ as well as ‘a strategy to increase the rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2003, 8). First, we observed staff in action over multiple days as they interacted with offenders and/or their professional colleagues. The observation situations were selected for their potential to provide rich data about the research focus (e.g. a meeting of staff to monitor the progress of a novel intervention, a general meeting of staff and offenders to identify aspects of the programme that needed attention, as well as aspects that were working well). This involved us recording our impressions of what we took to be matters relevant to learning. Here, field observations noting non-verbal body language, gestures and identifying who participated in group interactions or not, provided useful complements to group talk. Initially two researchers acted simultaneously as observers. Later we reverted to single observers as we established comparability in what was being recorded. These observations of staff working covered approximately half of the total staff of Program.

Second, we interviewed staff as individuals or in small groups using semi-structured interviewing protocols. Most often we scheduled interviews after observations so that we could probe particular events and activities that we as external researchers and staff as workers had jointly experienced. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and returned to interviewees for verification, clarification, and possible additional comments. The interviews were typically of one hour’s duration and involved nine staff members who volunteered to participate in our research and who represented a broad cross-section of staff experience and expertise. Third, we reviewed written organizational materials about the programme such as working committee minutes, case management procedures and other textual materials produced by staff. These proved to be informative about the collective progress of work and learning faced by staff. In the interpretive
tradition, the interviews asked research participants to critically reflect on past activities, their own roles and those of others, and to make observations about how they as individuals, or as members of teams or groups, understood work and learning within an environment of constant change. Here as recounted by staff, a recent event of several offenders unexpectedly regressing back to the centre after partial release to the community plus an offender death represented crucial incidents that challenged the confidence of staff and tested the staff’s assumptions behind traditional and new modes of behaviour. In all three data collection methods, we paid particular attention to the business talk and discourses staff used to describe their experiences and understandings of learning at work and how such views affected their comments on role, identity and competence.

Construction of the case study was guided by the research focus on elucidating judgements and decisions made in specific challenging incidents in work performance. Such situations are likely to lead to significant learning by participants and, in this case, were very common, driven by a pragmatic imperative to innovate in the absence of established routines or work methods. With this focus, data from the three sources was analyzed to identify recurring patterns and dominant themes. This material was synthesised to produce an interpretation of participants’ major learning experiences in Program. We did not use any quantitative methods (e.g. surveys or questionnaires) or statistical analyses in the development of the case study. All names used are pseudonyms. We conducted the case study research more than one year after Program commenced operations. Most of the centre staff we interviewed had been integral members of the implementation for most of that year.

Findings

According to Garavan and McCarthy (2008), it is an unresolved issue whether collective learning processes can be planned in advance or whether they simply emerge spontaneously as groups carry out their work. In this case study, it was clear that how people learned to work differently emerged from their relations and interactions with each other, rather than drawing on traditional notions of competence as fully-developed and fully-assumed professional knowledge, skills, expertise. In this case study, it was notable that while things do not always go to plan, people do find practical solutions to problems that naturally occur in their work environment. Besides their disciplinary expertise, they use their work context and responses from others to learn how to go on. During our analysis of the empirical case study data, three prominent themes highlighted how the concept of collective competence emerges from the work that must be performed, i.e. people learn to work differently with others.

These three main themes shaped by how staff talked about working differently:

- The significance of change agents and change triggers.
- The creative challenges that must be negotiated to cross traditional role and competence boundaries.
- Discovering versus planning how to work differently.

We discuss each of these three themes separately in the Findings section and then further develop their implications and inter-relationships in the Discussion section.

1. The significance of change agents and change triggers for working differently

OC/OD literature and teaching texts commonly highlight the importance of change agents in unfreezing existing modes of behaviour and driving change (Armenakis and Bedeian 1993; Graetz et al. 2006; Ottaway
Largely I’m interested in the general notion of treatment but also in entirely different approaches to the ways centres can be run. I knew to run this place … would be entirely different, I needed an entirely different manager … and [that’s why] I targeted Amy. (Larry, Corrective Services manager)

I’m the change agent in the gaol that holds the line on how we should do things … [previous models are] designed to work with the individual [but] I’ve always been far more organizationally-focused …so I say to the custodial staff, you represent the law, you’re legal actors and the way you behave towards the prisoners is whether they will engage in change or get resistant to change … Therapeutic jurisprudence would argue against carrot-and-stick approaches and the paternalistic state … They want as much as possible that the offender has autonomy and can make choices. We’re not very good in [corrective services at] giving people choices. (Amy, the director of the centre)

The beauty of it is that Amy has got this great theory in her mind, she comes and it’s fantastic. But it’s requiring all of us to work together to put it into place. It’s amazing because it pulls all of us together. It’s been a great learning curve for myself that in itself, because I’m used to … I can see these are the things that need to be done. (Tara, programmes staff)

But change agency is not just the stimulus or privilege of the leader; it needs to be embedded among people and across processes as a collective phenomenon in order for outcomes to be sustainable. For the research participants, the occurrence of various change triggers seemed particularly significant. Change triggers are individual actions, events or organizational settings that come together in the work situation to signal major shifts in behaviour and actions. They may signal important beginnings or ends, represent crucial incidents that are remembered in organizational history, or appear on the surface to be trivial yet have deep-rooted significance. Such change triggers contribute to how a group of people negotiate new understandings of meaning in their collective situation. Sometimes big events are not as significant as they first appear, whereas what appear to be regular activities or trivial events can occasionally be crucial.

I suppose [it’s] the common interest. What’s really good about [the weekly integration meeting] is, say, someone might have a little bit more experience with mental health, the other person might have a little bit more experience with drug addiction, the other person might have a little bit more experience with homelessness and developmental disability... So coming together, we’re having a lot of input with information and learning. That’s very very valuable. (Tara, programmes staff).

Like when we were doing the milkshakes for the rewards – it was hard for some officers to make an inmate a milkshake … because … it comes down to this power thing. They probably thought that it made them like they were subservient. But when we explained to them that traditionally [custody has] always been the punisher, now we’re trying to change that. They started thinking about that, I could still see the hesitation … but then again as managers, it was important for us to model good behaviour as well. So we’d go and do it, and they were happy; they could see that … well, if the boss is doing it, so I’ll go and do it. Even the inmates, they’re suspicious as well when we’re making their milkshakes - you see them looking strange: what’s he done to it, has he done something? (Wayne, custodial officer and manager)

Staff and managers did regard the regression of several offenders back to the centre, followed shortly afterwards by the death of an offender while out in the community, as major change triggers. Such incidents challenge tacit assumptions about the value of working differently and seek re-commitment to ‘staying the path’. They surface human reactions about individual and group vulnerabilities, questioning the contributions of the work performed:

In both of those situations, there’s a feeling of failure from some of the staff. And again I think once you’re vulnerable, you’re looking for something else to blame. And that’s … just a natural thing. (Lorna, programmes staff)

I have to say it affected me deeply and I didn’t expect … that it would affect me like that … I just thought I can’t believe this has happened. They were all doing so well … and now they’re not doing so well. Now that we’ve had this regression – we
thought people would be progressing and moving on and there’d be a new lot coming in – it’s sort of changed our life … I feel it has changed my role a bit … because I didn’t expect people to come back. (Linda, programmes staff)

[The robustness of Stage 2] remains to be seen. I think it’s getting there, it’s getting there. But look, I think we’re about to get the next influx … from Stage 1 to Stage 2 I think in the next [few] weeks. Yeah, that will be like half a dozen to a dozen I think of them going over. That’s the big test. (Andrew, custodial officer)

It’s very unrealistic to expect that everyone is going to succeed who does this programme. So for whatever reason in correctional treatment, people have this completely ridiculous expectation like any type of intervention or treatment, you expect to get some type of positive results but you don’t necessarily expect to get … universal success. Especially by targeting the right people, if we are putting the highest risk people in the programme, we would expect to get people who would generally not go very well at all. (Larry, Corrective Services manager)

These views reflect the inter-dependencies that roles, rules and relations have in shaping organizational behaviour (Emmet 1966), especially in connection to perceived competencies as professionals. Such change triggers disrupt the expectations and predictability of organizational affairs (e.g. the assumption that offenders after being ‘rehabilitated’ would progress forward rather than backwards), requiring new creative responses to accommodate the revised configuration of practical reality (e.g. what to do now with the offenders who have regressed).

2. Working differently: Creative challenges in crossing role and competence boundaries

When uncertainty is introduced during change initiatives, people react differently; often they tend to focus on issues of job-related change uncertainty rather than strategic (i.e. big picture rationale) or structural (i.e. reporting hierarchy) uncertainty (Bordia et al. 2004):

A Job Description would be really handy (laughs) because it leaves me feeling very anxious about whether I’m not doing the right thing, or I’m over-stepping into someone else’s boundaries … I’m … quite anxious about what am I meant to do, where I am meant to be. (Carol, programmes staff)

So when you move from a place that’s a really identified role, it’s the traditional way, you’re very comfortable and secure in that, then you just carry on the normal way. But when you go to something else, when you’re feeling insecure in yourself, you push out with what you know best. (Lorna, programmes staff).

So we’ve had to stretch; we’ve really had to think how we really do business and it’s been on-the-go. Like a team, three of us might be sitting down having a cup of tea. We say, we review a lot, we have to. We say, this is what we’re doing – are we achieving our end goals? Yeah, right; then we say, OK, let’s do it differently. We’ve got nothing to lose; let’s try it. As long as I know it’s acting ethically and it’s within the big boundary, I’m happy to run with it and take the risk – do you know what I mean? (Wayne, custodial officer and manager)

So we had to basically create our own procedure and process in allowing [offender leave] to occur and not breaking rules while we’re doing it, like basic common sense rules. So we’ve come up with our own pass system and that’s a learning process as well. We learned as we went along. … It was frustrating … for me, simply because there were too many cooks spoiling the broth. (Travis, custodial officer)

So for some staff, role uncertainty challenges identity and value of individual contributions in the search for solutions that go beyond individual interests. Identity at the individual level continues to shift, implicated with changing collective and organizational contexts – as Andrew, a custodial officer, says: ‘That’s one thing that’s different [here] … (pause for several seconds) … well, maybe I’m different now’. For custodial staff traditionally charged with ensuring offender security, this new working model questions established norms of authority and power that custodial officers within prisons have typically held:
Andrew: Yeah, [Amy] was talking about mixing up the roles … It looks like I’ll do part of the liaising. So at [other main gaols], that would never happen. [There,] your role was much more clearly defined. And you’re not encouraged; you’re discouraged from going outside your pay grade so-to-speak.

Researcher: So this new task … would be something that would normally be done by another function?

Andrew: I would have thought so, definitely. It appears like I’m going to play some kind of role. Like I’ll just take it as it comes.

Researcher: Would you have any of your fellow officers here who might say: ‘What are you doing that for? You shouldn’t be doing that’?

Andrew: Everyone’s got different motivations for being here. And I respect most of those motivations. But I think to myself, anyone’s who’s coming here knows that you’re going to have to do more than just custodial work.

The symbolic authority that a uniform signals is an important issue in a prison environment where control is valued (Hepburn 1985). For some custodial officers who currently wear the uniform, their uniform creates an additional barrier that reinforces, unnecessarily, the separateness among the functions. This symbol makes the task of crossing or eliminating the boundaries in support of a common outcome for offenders and for themselves as a collaborative team, even harder:

[I would] lose the uniform. It gets rid of those boundaries I was talking about: the rigidity, it kills that. The symbolism is wrong. And it [is] absolutely wrong for here. Absolutely wrong … Over at [another centre], they’ve got rid of the uniform – they’ve got jeans, they wear a coffee shirt … It’s still a uniform as such but it’s a more corporate thing. It’s more fitting to the environment they’re in [so custodial officers] are not seen as a chief at the gaol … by the inmates. (Travis, custodial officer)

Look, I see a place for a uniform. It is an authority symbol and … different people have different takes on how they want to exert their authority over inmates … not everyone is capable of … maintaining authority without some sort of a prop. Some people put the uniform on like a suit of armour … I don’t believe I ever have … it’s never been important to me. (Andrew, custodial officer)

3. Discovering versus planning for how to work differently

Change interventions are described often as episodic events in an organization’s history that can be planned for and managed systematically (Waddell, Cummings and Worley 2004). Other literature disputes this view, suggesting change as more continuous and emergent (Staudenmeyer, Tyre and Perlow 2002; Tsoukas and Chia 2002; Weick and Quinn 1999). An initial priority of Program was to recruit staff committed to its radical philosophy. To some extent, managers can try to recruit ‘different’ people by setting expectations that ‘this model is different’. Yet interview situations are typically artificial and negotiated and are not necessarily good indicators of the potential fit of an individual to a desired work environment. The practical reality is more a process of discovery:

During the interview, they make it very plain that you’re coming into a totally different environment … [still] it took some adjusting as I’d had [several years of large traditional gaols] behind me … So I had to shift … the goal-post had to be shifted quite a bit. (Andrew, custodial officer)

I’m finding out about [the role] myself [because] it’s a bit different here. We get a lot of access here [to offenders] … so I guess we’re lucky in that regard because in the other gaols that I’ve been involved in, it’s been quite prescriptive about what you have to do. So it’s almost like you have to make [offenders] fit with what you’ve got really, rather than here we can sort of massage it a bit and try and get … a meeting of interests and what people want to do … we have to be sort of creating our role here (Linda, programmes staff)

You find when people come here, they change anyway. So there’s no point in trying to get that false façade out of them. Normally when they apply for promotion to here, they’ll do a bit of research. So they’ll say the things that they think you want to hear. So I look for people who are open and can communicate. I don’t want people who have big egos either, because
they’ve really got to get down and dirty. But in saying that, we try to be as transparent as we can. Everyone should be given an opportunity. (Wayne, custodial officer and manager)

Working through continuous change as opposed to episodic change, thus becomes more an ongoing process to obtain coherence out of daily activities. As Tsoukas and Chia (2002, 567) observe, ‘change is inherent in human actions … organization is an attempt to order the intrinsic flux of human action … organization is a pattern that is constituted, shaped and emerging from change … and in the process of [stemming change] is generated by it’. The research participants see this through the frustrations of having to make up work ‘on the fly’, work that does not necessarily show up as productive key performance indicators. Yet these situations can generate creative possibilities and enhanced understandings about the value of individual and collective work:

Put out the little fires as they start. That’s all I can do. If I let it go, a little fire turns into a bush fire, you know? So I have to. These little things have to be jumped on and sorted [out] as quickly as possible (Travis, custodial officer)

Most of my time is actually spent talking, interacting, answering questions and responding. And the paper just piles up and piles up. So in reality, you don’t see a great outcome. (Lorna, programmes staff)

Lots of things come up – this is a very unique place. Things come up where there’s no Standard Operating Procedure that covers it. You kind of like think: oh, this is a new situation. (Andrew, custodial officer)

A little bit in thinking: ‘Oh, what am I going to do? What am I going to do?’ But having been in that position for a [few] months now of ‘what are we going to do there, we haven’t got that sorted out yet’ and that sort of thing – it’s been okay, it’s working out okay. (Tara, programmes staff).

This case study has highlighted how staff charged with implementing Program are learning new modes of work behaviour that require them often to work outside their normal comfort of disciplinary competence. In the next section, we discuss what this case study implies for the possible convergence of theories of change and development with workplace learning and notions of collective competence in OD and HRD research.

**Discussion: learning, change and development**

Contemporary work life represents ongoing challenges for employees faced with frequent restructurings, downsizings, new strategies, new job roles and changing leadership. Historically, well-defined job boundaries were invented to make the most effective use of division of labour. Specialization by those best qualified and trained to perform jobs was valued, so that organizations could ensure lack of duplication, making the most efficient use of resources (Taylor 1911; Weber 1964) in order to provide predictability to organizational affairs. However, organizations also need human creativity and innovation to exploit new opportunities – courage to break established norms that can result in new forms of success and growth. Thus there remains constant tension in organizational environments between exploiting existing practices and exploring new knowledge and learning that must be negotiated (Levinthal and March 1993; Crossan, Lane and White 1999; Fuller and Unwin 2004).

**Operating in environments of continuous change that require active improvisation and contextualized learning**

As this case study illustrates and other authors have argued (Tsoukas and Chia 2002; Weick and Quinn 1999), organizational change might be better conceptualized as ongoing improvisation, human action that is a natural and routine aspect of organizational life rather than the exception. We see problematic issues with conventional views of learning that describe learners as having some kind of deficit (the ‘L plate’ syndrome)
that needs to be addressed propositionally (see critiques by Solomon 1999; also Fenwick 2001). Similarly, we
dispute views of learning as a product to be acquired or a milestone (e.g. to achieve a competency standard) to
be passed (see critiques by Hager 2004a, 2004b and Sfard 1998). We also challenge conceptions of learning
as propositional knowledge needing to be transferred from one context to another, such as from school to
work or from one organization to another (Kontoghiorghes 2002). In contrast, the findings of this case study
suggest that when managers provide opportunities for groups to interact and judge together in increasingly
diverse, context-specific ways, the group’s moral, emotional and rational commitments to work and to each
other are more explicitly surfaced and negotiated. Such commitments are strongly influenced by notions of
competence and the boundaries that they imply.

The performance of work is closely tied up with the parameters of the job, its role and various concepts of
practitioner identity. This involves complex interactions among individuals who have diverse skills,
knowledge and work histories, the organization’s guiding cultural norms and protocols and the particular
contingent situations that structure how individuals and groups must decide how to go on (Wittgenstein 1968).
The issue of comfort in competence is an important one because for many individuals, their identity is
implicated and intertwined in their role: what they do in their job and how they perceive their role to be
valued or not relative to other roles in the organization. At the corrections centre, although roles continue to
be recruited for and differentiated by function, when it comes to the crunch, the overriding concern is an
operating mode that encourages proactivity in getting the job done. In such a fluid enterprise, the power of the
disciplinary competence comes not from its rigid application, but from what it can contribute in the overlaps.
‘Working in the overlaps’ is disruptive, but developmentally, this mode is useful because it causes a
practitioner to self-reflect and question the tacit assumptions that influence the boundaries of his or her current
practice. From this self-reflection (or challenge from someone outside the practice) can come creative
practice: practice that is extended for new circumstances, practice that reflects the practical realities of life and
work in contemporary society.

The level of tolerance of ambiguity will obviously vary. ‘Making up’ new actions can activate a freedom
to create, yet for some, it comes at a price of personal frustration. Making up processes that have no previous
precedent opens up the opportunity to explore new alternatives, as well as to analyze the limitations of current
practice. Such actions display human behaviours of accepting and resisting change. OC/OD literature on
change models (Graetz et al. 2006; Waddell, Cummings and Worley 2004) suggest that resistance is a barrier
to overcome. Resistance is often explained in terms of a lack of sufficient participatory involvement in the
change process by employees or issues of power relations that occur among different hierarchical levels or
across functional groups within the organization. The issue of power is closely allied to control, coercion and
the use of force. It has been a common issue within prison environments using traditional notions of security
(Hepburn 1985) and is symbolised by the uniform that many custodial officers still wear.

However, a more productive source of power is the power of language as an under-valued tool that
managers and employees have in negotiating outcomes, influencing motivations and reshaping the ruling
suggests that there are at least three ways to make sense of organizational change and how it should be
managed: the behaviourist, the cognitivist and the discursive. For Tsoukas (2005), it is the third way of
managing change – understanding discursive practices – that is a more recent and fruitful trend in
organizational studies research. Thinking and acting in organizational life are not private or individual affairs
– they take place within social and socially-negotiated circumstances that shape the meanings of what is said,
what is acted upon and the nature of relationships that develop over time:

Change is a fundamental ontological category of lived experience … organization is an attempt to order and stabilize the
intrinsic flux of human action … change must not be thought of as a property of organization; rather organization must be
understood as a property of change – the attempt to simplify and stabilize what would have been an irreducible dynamic and irreducible lived experience (Tsoukas 2005, 101).

Change is produced through the ways people talk, communicate and converse in the context of practical activities (Tsoukas 2005, 102–103).

We tend to undervalue the power of talk in the workplace because we perceive talk as mainly mediating a path to generate other outcomes. In common organizational life, outcomes matter and are more valued. Yet how groups generate outcomes is strongly influenced by how individuals and groups choose to talk, debate and reflect; these discourses are inherent aspects of experiential learning. Talk can make tacit assumptions more explicit; talk helps to create forums of meaning around which further understandings of collective work can be constructed. It is in such forums that the value of alternative perspectives can be considered or discarded, or commitment to future actions can occur in organic ways. Additionally, forums that frame daily work and micro-interactions within broader frames of reference are useful because they help individuals see connections to issues of strategic importance.

As this case study illustrated, examining the talk of practice can help to unpack how practical understandings of work (e.g. designing a new leave pass system) are intertwined with social relations (e.g. levels of frustration because ‘there were too many cooks spoiling the broth’), that must be must be managed practically (e.g. ‘like basic common sense rules’), but that also contribute to new learning (e.g. ‘we learned as we went along’). Analyzing such talk provides insights into the relations that are dynamically created between individuals and within groups in response to changing situational factors in the work environment. Such insights support the notion of learning as a holistic process of development, where actors can both influence and be influenced by others in practical and creative ways.

**Moving toward concepts of collective competence and development**

The temporality of change shapes individuals’ trajectories for learning (Tanggaard and Elmholdt 2007) and how much they choose to engage with and internalise processes for working differently. The comfort that comes from knowing what to do in the job is often shaped by educational preparation and prior experience of what has succeeded or not. The courage to step out of these well-defined boundaries will depend on the judgements that individuals and groups make to confront any knowledge, moral or ethical dilemmas that emerge situationally and contingently. Such judgements influence personal motivations and the quality of inter-personal relations that are constructed with work colleagues.

The notion of competence has various meanings in different theoretical domains that contribute to organizational research. In theories of workplace learning, competence is often understood as organizationally-relevant knowledge and skills acquisition, drawing in pedagogic practices similar to school contexts (i.e. a workplace curriculum), but with an orientation towards pragmatic problem-solving and situated within sociocultural contexts (Billett 2001, 2002). Theories of workplace learning and theories of human resource development (HRD) share common conventional understandings of a progressive staging towards competence as a milestone to be achieved, a model well-researched by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986; H. Dreyfus 2001). The domain of HRD has used this model of competence to link the importance of skills to training and the assessment of expertise needed in vocational professions (Harris et al. 1995; le Deist and Winterton 2005; van der Klink and Boon 2005). OC and OD theories have been less focused on competence per se, but have identified related concepts – change agents, change triggers, change interventions and motivations shaping resistance to change (Armendakis and Bedeian 1993; Graetz et al. 2006) – that influence a practitioner’s continued ability to perform competently within environments of change.

The trouble with these understandings of competence is that they individualize competence as a property and characteristic of the practitioner. In the current era of ‘triumphant individualism’ (Sayer and Walker 1992,
1), we forget that most organizational work is collectively-generated, certainly coordinated among multiple participants and influenced by social practices, cultures, expectations and perspectives (Nicolini, Gherardi and Yanow 2003; Sarangi and Coulthard 2000). We reject the common idea that competence is mainly about acquisition of specific skills and knowledge. Rather, we view competence as embedded and intertwined in notions of personal and social identity (Jenkins 2004). This view resonates with the present case study. Notions of ‘becoming’ suggest ongoing and evolving change rather than a passive state of ‘being’ a custodial officer, a parole officer, an education officer or a psychologist. The purpose of providing inter-professional care at the centre was not to convert custodial officers into psychologists, or to create education officers out of parole officers. The value and level of excellence from each profession was still critically needed to produce the desired rehabilitative outcomes. However, ‘becoming’ an inter-professional care team suggests a relational dependence that goes beyond self in life and work. This group of individuals has experienced understanding different ways of working together as a developmental process that has been disruptive, frustrating, challenging and creative. They have learned much along the way. They have learned something about themselves (‘That’s one thing that’s different here … [or] maybe I’m different now’ – Andrew). They have learned something about working with and relating to others (‘It’s amazing because it pulls all of us together … we’re having a lot of input with information and learning. That’s very, very valuable’ – Tara). Paradoxically, nurturing within role may achieve needed effects outside role:

The more valued a staff member feels, the better they are to give to the people they’re working with. The more comfortable and competent they feel in the role they’re doing, the greater the chance they will engage in something that isn’t the norm … for that role – Lorna, programmes staff.

Recent workplace learning literature (Boreham 2004, 2007) argues for a new vocabulary of competence that incorporates both individual and collective senses of learning and that recognizes the interdependency and emergent quality of sense-making in work contexts. Boreham is not arguing ‘the essentialist claim that all competence … is collective’ (Boreham 2004, 14), but he is commenting on what he perceives as a bias over the last several decades (particularly in work-related education and training in the United Kingdom) towards the individualization of occupational competence. He observes that ‘individual and collective competencies are inextricably interwoven into most people’s jobs’ and we need to change the language of competence to recognize ‘a mutual constitutive relationship between individual and collective competence [and to repudiate] the outcomes model of competence’ (Boreham 2004, 14–15).

Griffiths and Guile (2003) suggest that existing typologies of work experience could be enhanced through conceptualizing a connective model that is oriented towards development that is both vertical (disciplinary or specialist) and horizontal (mediating different forms of expertise and the demands of different contexts) – concepts that appear to borrow from and extend Bernstein’s (1999) views on vertical and horizontal discourse. In Griffiths and Guile’s model, a focus on developing polycontextual skills (ways of adapting to diverse situations) can help to continually re-situate learning and find opportunities for alternative action (Griffiths and Guile 2003, 72). Their views are also consistent with similar arguments that Engeström, Engeström and Kärkkäinen (1995) expressed about the value of polycontextuality and boundary crossing as broader, multi-dimensional views of expertise. Such theories that resist uni-dimensional, prescriptive and propositional approaches are indicative of the value of learning, change and development as co-relative processual concepts. This relational view of learning appears to be finding traction in healthcare settings (Nagle 1999; Sims and Sims 1993) where multiple professions must collaborate to deliver holistic patient care. We believe it also has the potential for broader organizational diffusion.

In organizational learning literature, an antagonistic and false dualism has traditionally been set up between individual and organizational learning (one or the other) rather than recognizing them as different
foci of analysis or problematising the intimate relationship between both concepts (Crossan, Lane and White 1999; Easterby-Smith, Crossan and Nicolini 2000; Kim 1993). In organizational research, we have had more difficulty in developing good conceptualizations of collective competence although some have come at it from the perspective of team learning (see for example, Kasl, Marsick and Dechant 1997; Yorks et al. 2003) or collective capability (see quite different discussions by Ibrahim 2006 compared to Orlikowski 2002). As noted previously, Garavan and McCarthy (2008) argue powerfully for the centrality of collective learning processes to HRD research and practice. This present paper contributes to the research conversation about collective competence by suggesting that theories of workplace learning and theories of OC/OD also provide valuable conceptualizations of context, time and relations that could help each other’s domains to unpack the complex notion of collective competence.

This case study has surfaced two sets of transformation cycles that are operating in parallel: the explicit intended one with the offenders and the more tacit unfolding one with staff. These dual cycles of transformation influence each other in interdependent ways: staff are inter-connected in helping each other achieve developmentally for the offenders, the centre and for themselves. Learning as development involves humanistic change at both individual and collective levels through organic, intertwined processes. Unpacking collective development poses considerable conceptual challenges. We currently lack the toolset, taxonomy and vocabulary to investigate this increased level of complexity. However a pathway might be socially constructed that uses the collective wisdom of the many (Surowiecki 2004). The conventional divides that separate theory from practice, organizational learning from OD research, HRD from OD research should be debated through continuing instances of interdisciplinary research. We may well find that the power of ‘and’, when applied to valued notions of specialization and competence, can highlight opportunities to address identified gaps in HRD and OD research (Church, Waclawski and Seigel 1999; Ruona and Gibson 2004; Stewart 2007), raise the importance of relationality to organizational and HRD research (Bradbury and Lichtenstein 2000; Callahan 2007), and recognize the holism of learning and development.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed how working outside the comfort of competence in a corrections centre is shaped by contextual and emergent aspects to change and forms part of the developmental learning process for personal and collective professional growth. Theories of change and development and theories of workplace learning can provide helpful paradigms in discussing the relevance of context, time and relations that should be further explored in future interdisciplinary research. In particular, it has been argued that notions of collective learning and collective competence have become important for understanding complex workplaces such as the one presented in this case study. The recently proposed ‘typology of collective learning in organizations’ (Garavan and McCarthy 2008, 459-61) offers stimulating guidance for anyone planning to undertake further investigation of these matters.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the helpful comments of two anonymous reviewers and also research support from an Australian Research Council Discovery grant. An earlier draft of this article was published in the Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Human Resource Development Research Across Europe held in Lille, France on 21–23 March 2008, where it received the Alan Moon Memorial Prize for best conference paper.
References


