
ICT SUPPORTED WORK-BASED CONFLICT RESOLUTION LEARNING

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Learning at work

The development of work-based learning has traditionally been associated with the need to develop the competences, skills, attitudes and behaviours that produce effectiveness in implementing defined job performance in relation to standards, productivity and outputs. The idea of learning at work and on the job was defined most narrowly in the early literature on the subject. In the heyday of Fordist mechanized production, Frederick Taylor developed the method termed 'scientific management'. While a crude summary of Taylor's position is that of 'time and motion' studies, it is nonetheless among the first time that work itself was systematically observed and quantitatively analyzed. While production was the goal, learning was addressed, even if in the most narrow and circumscribed way. This pseudo-scientific technique was designed to look dispassionately at the production and manufacturing process and to develop a system in which efficiency was developed to the utmost and human factors reduced to that of a near robot. Any learning required was that determined by management to enable workers to do their assigned tasks most productively.

In 1911 Taylor summarized these 'principles' of scientific management:

1. Replace rule-of-thumb work methods with methods based on scientific study of tasks.
2. Scientifically select, train and develop each employee rather than passively leaving them to train themselves.
3. Provide detailed instruction and supervision of each worker in the performance of that worker's discrete task.
4. Divide work equally between managers and workers, so that the managers apply scientific management principles to planning the work and the workers actually perform the tasks.

Work based learning has evolved significantly since then. The modern idea of developing a rounded set of work-based competencies that facilitate complex systemic analysis, foster critical and reflective skills and address more complex issues of environmental well-being and soft-skills regarding human relationships is still however regarded with suspicion by management systems where the critical bottom-line is profitability and efficiency. Emphasis

has altered however from a concentration on instrumental conceptions of vocational training on technical skills towards a concept of lifelong learning that is adaptable and transferable. The old dichotomies between general and vocational education, between liberal education and specific job training, are dying away. There is a growing realization that as well as highly specific job-related technical skills, the demands of the globalized workplace make it imperative that social and interpersonal knowledge, skills and competencies be incorporated in any on-job learning program.

Background to comparative conflict resolution training

Traditional companies often saw training as being all that was required – enough to learn to do the job. This stratified and minimalist approach fits badly with the realities of rapidly changing external environments where all employees have to work together in anticipating change and challenge. In this context employees are no longer seen as merely selling their labour. They are also seen as producers who have the capacity and, some would say, obligation to learn. Many companies increasingly see on-job learning as essential to growth and enhanced competitiveness. This is because new skills are continually being acquired. New ways of using old skills are also being learned.

In the area of conflict and dispute at work however, we see an intersection of issues that address work behaviours, lost productivity, system failure and dysfunction – all of which can gravely impair performance and outputs. Developing learning around conflict and conflict resolution techniques at the level of the workplace thus becomes a critical area for the investigation of innovation and creativity in applying ICT supported learning skills to learners in the middle of disputed spaces.

Effective on-job learning strategies focus on staff, management, stakeholders and customers. Effective work based learning calls for a clear strategy and an atmosphere of trust. Investing in people has risks. Staff may leave or take up better opportunities. But it has clear rewards. Most will learn to contribute and improve. Above all, a learning organization is positioned to deal with change. It values creativity. The lifeblood of future organizations is the ability to create new products and innovate.

This paper compares and contrasts two ICT supported work based initiatives that have been developed to address social conflict issues, to support staff competence in dealing with sometimes intractable disputes and to create a rights based approach to the enhancement of professional skills in dealing with conflict, dispute, racism and anti-social behaviours. The examples are drawn from field operatives in international conflict zones attending the on-line course in conflict resolution of UOC, the Open University of Catalonia in Barcelona and the transport employees of Veolia in Dublin who have been participating in anti-racism and diversity training in the conflict resolution programs developed by Universal Learning Systems.

Conflict and work

Conflict may be any sharp disagreement or opposition of interests or ideas. Conflict is a normal and natural part of any workplace, as it is in all social situations. The impacts however can be severe with a tendency for morale to be lowered, a noted increase in absenteeism, ineffective communications and decreased productivity. It has been estimated that managers can spend at least 25 percent of their time resolving workplace conflicts – causing lowered office performance. Handling and resolving conflicts that arise in the workplace is one of the biggest challenges managers and employees face. Typically there are two responses to conflict: run away (avoidance) or ‘battle it out’. In either case, we often feel uncomfortable or dissatisfied with the results because no resolution has been achieved. By learning to resolve conflict constructively, we can turn a potentially destructive situation into an opportunity for creativity and enhanced performance.

There are many causes or reasons for conflict in any work setting. Some of the primary causes are:

1. Poor Communication: different communication styles can lead to misunderstandings between employees or between employee and manager. Lack of communication drives conflict ‘underground’.
2. Different Values: any workplace is made up of individuals who see the world differently. Conflict occurs when there is a lack of acceptance and understanding of these differences.
3. Differing Interests: conflict occurs when individual workers ‘fight’ for their personal goals, ignoring organizational goals and organizational well-being.
4. Scarce Resources: too often, employees feel they have to compete for available resources in order to do their job. In a resource scarce environment, this causes conflicts – despite awareness of how scarce resources may be.
5. Personality Clashes: all work environments are made up of differing personalities. Unless colleagues understand and accept each other’s approach to work and problem-solving, conflict will occur.
6. Poor Performance: when one or more individuals within a work unit are not performing - not working up to potential – and this is not addressed, conflict is inevitable.

In the courses compared here, participants are encouraged to look at the specific contexts of violence, aggression and conflict and how these have been manifested in the experience of working in assigned job roles. It is possible to trace these elements from the divisions in society via explicit or implicit conflict or to the impact of patterns of migration and social and demographic change over recent years. For participants in these programs, it is possible to see and understand how conflict emerges from social structures, economic systems, land ownership, religious identities, discrimination, struggles for equity as well as more traditional forms of military conflict and warfare.

Many theories of the origin and nature of conflict exist. From Aristotle to Hobbes, people have tried to come to terms with how otherwise peaceable and cooperative people can become filled with hate, fear and bitter contempt for other groups and individuals. Groups can act out these feelings and attitudes in disturbing and dreadful ways. For those in employment, it is manifest both in internal relationships and/or divisions or more pressingly, in terms of relationships with external actors – be they stakeholders or customers. Learners therefore need to be encouraged to look at these factors, develop awareness and see for themselves if the principles of peaceful conflict transformation can be relevant and applied.

In all theories of conflict however there are some common themes. These themes, to a certain extent, all rest on a couple of issues.

1. *Portrayals of the Other*: negative, despising and contemptuous or laced with threat and fear;
2. *De-humanization*: the Other is attacked or liquidated because it is not seen as human;
3. *In-groups and out-groups*: loyalty only to those who resemble “us” – the Other is irrelevant;
4. *Fear and threat*: the Other is evil and malevolent and must be contained or eradicated.

These themes are persistent and powerful throughout history. They rely on a sense that the Other is a permanent threat, which is a very effective way to mobilize and control one’s own side. These themes are very much universal and are also very destructive.

Apart from anything else, these issues mean that in a conflict situation it is very hard to really know anything about the Other. Many communities have adapted to this by simply living in a set of parallel worlds and separate viewpoints. Engagement may be minimal. While not ideal, it at least represents an absence of active violence. Nevertheless, in some shape or form, in all societies differences and diversity exist. Some mechanism has to be found to allow people to meet, interact and engage in positive and mutually rewarding ways. Negative portrayals of the Other lie at the root of much conflict and dispute. Negative approaches to the Other are one of the prime origins of conflict. These can be summarized as:

1. Prejudice;
2. Discrimination;
3. Stereotype;
4. Victimization.

Evolution of the UOC UNITAR training

The UOC (Open University of Catalonia) *Campus for Peace* has many years’ experience in designing and delivering advanced courses and training in conflict resolution across the globe. It offers a range of online learning options, academically managed by the School for Cooperation. The School for Cooperation is the institution offering training on a wide range of critical learning themes and issues related to learning in critical fields such as humanitarian

action, dependency, conflict resolution, sustainability, international humanitarian law and the management of non-profit making organizations active in peace construction.

Its training and course offerings extend over a wide field of programs and include Masters, Postgraduate degrees and specializations from UOC's International Graduate Institute (IPP) and learning projects specific to the *Campus for Peace*, in collaboration with other institutions such as UNITAR (*United Nations Institute for Training and Research*). UNITAR is the United Nations' professional training and research institute. It has been meeting the training needs of its personnel in the areas of environment, peace, security, diplomacy and governance of all UN member states since 1965. The UNITAR peacekeeping training program has extensive experience in the design of e-learning courses aimed at civilian, military and police personnel serving on peace operations. The development of a significant new level of technological capacity and application with advanced ICT supported learning has enabled a significant expansion of scale in recent years for students across the world.

UNITAR was researching qualitative online programs to improve their staff skills on peace and conflict resolution missions. For this reason, UNITAR and UOC started building an agreement based on sharing programs and students. The *Campus for Peace* was the answer to UNITAR's training goals - both in contents and ICT-supported methodology. On the one hand, the School for Cooperation runs different programs on conflict resolution on line and in English. On the other, UOC's virtual campus was an efficient system for the UN staff taking this program online. The students could connect and would have a welcoming tutor to help them navigate through the campus. Once they were enrolled, a personal tutor would accompany them during their academic semesters at UOC.

The agreement between UNITAR and UOC was to set out a collaboration in delivery of the *International Master in Conflictology*, the *Postgraduate Certificate in Armed Conflicts and Crisis Management*, the *Postgraduate in Societal and Business Conflicts*, the *Specialization in Armed Conflicts*, the *Specialization in Crisis Management*, the *Specialization in Workplace and Commercial Conflicts*, and the *Specialization in Social and Family Conflicts*.

UOC recognizes five courses taught in UNITAR's *Peacekeeping Training Program* as three subjects in the *Master in Conflictology* in the following qualifications: "Master in Conflictology", "Postgraduate Certificate in Armed Conflict and Crisis Management", "Postgraduate in Societal and Business Conflicts", "Specialization in Armed Conflicts", "Specialization in Crisis Management", "Specialization in Workplace and Commercial Conflicts", and "Specialization in Social and Family Conflicts".

This is a two-way agreement that also benefits UOC students wishing to take any subjects in the UNITAR course catalogue, as their credits will be validated. Consequently, students taking the Understanding Conflicts and Conflict Analysis and Conflict Resolution courses on the *Peacekeeping Training Program* will automatically obtain recognition of the *Introduction to Conflictology* subject on the UOC's *Master in Conflictology*.

Another of the possibilities offered by the agreement is the ability to undertake practical placements with UNITAR. UOC students who apply for it will be able to take part in the conflict resolution programs run by the United Nations and in peace operations and other post-conflict peacekeeping processes. Since then, the UOC School for Cooperation is providing conflict resolution training to UN workers sent on peace missions from October 2013.

UOC and UNITAR have established a convention based on sharing a program and students. UNITAR was seeking qualitative online programs to improve their staff competence on frontline missions. Building an online, recognized and official university is expensive and slow, so it made sense to join an already existing online university with an international campus and existing programs in. The present intake for the academic year 2013-14 is 87 students, selected by UNITAR – mostly soldiers on peace-keeping missions.

Change, conflict and combating racism in Veolia in Ireland

Enlargement of the European Union throughout the 1990s was accompanied by a profound demographic shift for most Member States. Buoyant economics and expansionary conditions associated with market liberalization meant that inward migration increased at significant rates. The EU now found itself at the centre of complex issues around migration, social complexity and ethnic diversity. The dramatic growth of racism in recent years now poses a real threat to communities and peace. Demographic transformation was profound and rapid in Ireland. The non-Irish population is now 10% of the population. Yet Ireland remains unique in Europe – it is the only country without an organized xenophobic, racist, anti-immigrant political movement.

Several issues have been identified in recent years regarding effective workplace diversity management. Issues around intolerance and individual racism have surfaced with regularity. National policy initiatives like the *Irish Human Rights Commission* have helped. But development of viable work-based anti-racism interventions that promote conflict resolution have been rare. A recent significant initiative was undertaken in 2013 to address ethnic conflict in a large national public transport provider, Veolia who operates the Dublin tram system (Luas). The company identified growing problems around aggressive and abusive customers, frequently based on racist attitudes or perceptions. More pressing was evidence of growing conflict between staff.

Universal Learning Systems was commissioned by Veolia in April 2013 to undertake the design and delivery of a diversity management and awareness-training program for staff. Several issues have been identified in recent years regarding effective diversity management in Veolia. These included *external* matters: interactions with the public (incidents, disruptive behaviour, hostility, aggression and insult – frequently based on racist attitudes and perceptions of ethnic origin). It also included *internal* issues; interactions between staff (including avoidance, poor communications or insensitivity around perceived difference). Management had also identified the effect of such attitudes and actions on staff and morale –

leading to stress, absenteeism and underperformance based on negative experiences across a number of diversity categories.

ULS has designed, developed and delivered a dedicated program to address these issues and to develop the skills, knowledge and competences to deal effectively with conflict management in contexts of Irish workplace diversity. The program was entitled *Engaging with Difference: Diversity Management Best Practice*. The aim was to provide training in key themes and issues in diversity management to support personal and professional competence in dealing confidently with human and social difference in a commercial transport context. This engaged staff to facilitate interventions to overcome conflict and promote an environment of respect, tolerance and rights based practice. The program is based on research findings and extensive experience of employer-based diversity and equality training to create conditions where the transport company and its key personnel can maximize the opportunities presented by diversity while minimizing or containing conflict.

The aim is to provide training in diversity management to support personal and professional competence in conflict resolution based on racism in a commercial transport context. By the end of the training, participants are able to:

1. Define main elements of cultural difference in the commercial transport sector;
2. Address issues around bias, stereotype, prejudice and discrimination;
3. Use leadership and organizational culture to address equal opportunities and conflict management;
4. Use key skills in human rights, conflict transformation and legislation;
5. Develop sustainable work based solutions in conflict resolution and diversity management in operations, customer relations and company business model.

In general terms, participants felt that diversity had varying degrees of relevance in their lives and/or place of work. While many did accept that Ireland had changed dramatically, only some saw this as reflected in their own lives in a community context. Many felt that Veolia had become more segregated socially along ethnic lines, although few could pin this down to specific reasons or causes. Many felt that the initial camaraderie that had existed at the commencement of the company's activities (several staff had been working for the company from the beginning) had disappeared. All felt that tensions needed to be addressed by some kind of management initiative to stimulate team-building and enhanced interaction.

Conclusions

All felt strongly that diversity might be helpful in understanding and dealing with different cultures. But by the same token issues around conflict and abuse had less to do with diversity than with deeply ingrained anti-social attitudes and behaviours. In terms of positive learning outcomes from the diversity training the following learning points were made. Staff had developed a better and stronger awareness of others and now had insights into different

cultures and traditions. There was a greater sensitivity to difference with achieved sense of curiosity around other cultures, traditions and customs. There was an improved understanding of communications between different groups. The comprehensive overview of the Irish legal and policy framework produced a basis for improved integration. The ICT dimensions meant that conflict could be discussed in a neutral framework. Most important was the evaluative finding around reporting of racist or discriminatory actions. Use of mobile phone technology meant this could be done on a rapid and user-friendly basis. Innovative access to critical diversity information was highly valued.

The challenges of population change, ethnic/cultural difference, migration and social exclusion have created concerns for Irish employers. Significant challenges exist in addressing issues and developing capacity around responses to ethnic conflict in Ireland. This program provides relevant, coherent and well-researched outcomes that address staff needs for methods and strategies in intercultural operations and conflict resolution. For both Veolia and UNITAR, partnership with external academic agencies provided a strong synergy of content and process in this critical learning field at a time of social transformation.

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