Working outside the comfort of competence
in a corrections centre

Paul Hager
Mary C. Johnsson

Paul Hager is Professor of Education at the University of Technology, Sydney. Mary Johnsson is a doctoral student at the University of Technology, Sydney

Abstract

Contrary to popular myth, modern prison environments are often workplaces that embrace change and reform. Stakeholders such as policy makers, managers and administrators currently look for innovative ways to rehabilitate offenders and re-integrate them back into the community, rather than continuing to incarcerate offenders to reduce harm to the community. In some cases, innovative models of offender rehabilitation require new ways of working among staff, whose typical roles are functional and well-defined within the disciplines of custody, medical care, counselling, education and probation and parole.

This paper discusses the informal workplace learning experiences of staff members working through a new model for offender rehabilitation at a corrections centre. Our findings are developed from examining daily work and critical incidents as change triggers through observations and semi-structured interviewing. The deliberate multi-disciplinary staff team approach adopted by the director of the centre has been a significant change intervention that has challenged work roles and work practices. Yet in environments of ongoing and rapid change, it is the emergent quality of creative human interactions that generates understandings of collective competence (Boreham 2004, 2007) rather than individuals staying within the comfort of individual competence. Such relationally-constructed learning that require ‘working in the overlaps’, signal a possible convergence between theories of workplace learning and organisational change/development that can reshape human resource development (HRD) research and practice and improve understandings of learning.

Aim and Purpose

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 program. The program features various innovations:

- A radical new model for treating convicted drug offenders.
- Staff required to work as a multi-disciplinary team to deliver inter-professional care, thereby challenging long-embedded individual and group work roles.
- Dynamically-designed organisational work practices that emerge from pragmatic and creative interactions.

Our purpose is to illustrate through discussion of our empirical findings that theories of organisational change (OC) and development (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 program and the research methodology used to produce the case study. Next, we highlight how 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. In our discussion of these findings, we examine their implications for a nexus of selected theories of workplace learning and theories of organisational 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 & Winick 1991) suggests the law should be positive or neutral, not punitive with respect to individuals in society and the desire to operationalise this concept as a rehabilitation framework is the basis for the design and implementation of this program. 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 organisation-wide perspective to change. This means not only addressing offenders' cognitive and behavioural predispositions at an individual level, but also their surrounding organisational climate as shaped by interactions with staff at the centre. Over forty staff work at the centre, including custodial officers, alcohol and drug counsellors, psychotherapists, probation and parole officers, education 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. Our case study focused only on the work and learning of staff, not the offenders.

Research methodology

As part of a broader research program on workplace learning, we have been examining how practitioners make judgements and decisions in specific challenging incidents or initiatives within their organisations. We have focused on understanding the nature of learning that emerges from the conduct of work required for organisational outcomes; work that is performed individually but most often with others – what we call informal learning (Hager & Halliday 2006) in contrast to more structured forms of learning that occur in formal education or training. We used a mix of qualitative data collection methods. We observed staff in action over multiple days as they interacted with offenders and/or their professional colleagues. We interviewed staff as individuals or in small groups using semi-structured interviewing protocols, most often scheduling interviews after observations so that we could probe particular events and activities in which we as external researchers and staff jointly experienced. In addition, we reviewed written organisational materials about the program, working committee minutes and other textual materials produced by staff.

In the interpretive tradition, we typically 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, a recent event of several offenders unexpectedly regressing back to the centre after partial release to the community plus an offender death became critical incidents that challenged the confidence of staff and tested the assumptions behind traditional and new modes of behaviour. In addition, 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. We did not use any quantitative methods (e.g. surveys or questionnaires) or statistical analyses in the development of our case study. All names used are pseudonyms.

Findings

We conducted our 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. Three themes surfaced from our empirical data, shaped by how staff talked about working
differently:

- The significance of change agents and change triggers.
- The creative tensions negotiated in crossing traditional role and competency boundaries.
- Planning for versus discovering how to work differently.

1. Working differently: The presence of change agents and change triggers

OC/OD literature and teaching texts commonly highlight the importance of change agents in unfreezing existing modes of behaviour and driving change (Armenakis & Bedeian 1993; Graetz et al. 2006; Ottaway 1983; Waddell, Cummings & Worley 2004). Amy, the director, could certainly be regarded as a change agent in her enthusiasm and leadership for operationalising the therapeutic jurisprudence model:

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 (Amy’s boss).

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 organisationally-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 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…

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 our research participants, the occurrence of various change triggers seemed particularly significant. Change triggers are individual actions, events or organisational settings that come together in the work situation to signal major shifts in behaviour and actions. They may signal important beginnings or ends, represent critical incidents that are remembered in organisational 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 valuable.

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?

(Staff views on the differences of daily life)

Staff 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.

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.

[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.

It’s very unrealistic to expect that everyone is going to succeed who does this program. 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 program, we would expect to get people who would generally not go very well at all.

(Staff and management views)

These views reflect the inter-dependencies that roles, rules and relations have in shaping organisational behaviour (Emmet 1966), especially in connection to perceived competencies as professionals.

2. Working differently: Staying within or crossing role and competency 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 (big picture rationale) or structural (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.

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, and 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.

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?

(Staff views on roles and perceptions)

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 organisational 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:

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 especially hot issue in an environment attempting to nurture more equality in how multiple job functions all contribute to supporting a common outcome:

[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.

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.

(Two custodial officers on the symbolism of the uniform)

3. Planning for versus discovering how to work differently

Change interventions are described as episodic events in an organisation’s history that can be planned for and managed systematically (Waddell, Cummings and Worley 2004). Recent literature disputes this view, suggesting change as more continuous and emergent (Staudenmeyer, Tyre & Perlow 2002; Tsoukas & Chia 2002; Weick & Quinn 1999). At the centre, an initial priority was to recruit staff committed to the philosophy of this radical program. To some extent, managers can try to recruit ‘different’ people by setting expectations that ‘this model is different’. Yet interview situations are always artificial and negotiated (i.e. I want you to want this job/I want you to want me or be convinced I am qualified for this job) 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.

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.

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 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.

(Mix of staff and management views about the recruitment process)

Working though 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, p. 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’. Our research participants see this through the frustrations of having to make up work ‘on the fly’ 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.

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.

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.

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.

(Cross-section of staff views on daily work and outcomes)

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. Specialisation by those best qualified and trained to perform jobs was valued, so that organisations could ensure lack of duplication, making the most efficient use of resources (Taylor 1911; Weber 1964) in order to provide predictability to organisational affairs. However, organisations 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 organisational environments between exploiting existing practices and exploring new knowledge and learning that must be negotiated (Levinthal & March 1993; Crossan, Lane & White 1999; Fuller & Unwin 2004).

Continuous and contextualised change and learning

As our case study illustrates and other authors have argued (Tsoukas & Chia 2002; Weick & Quinn 1999), organisational change might be better conceptualised as ongoing improvisation, human action that is a natural and routine aspect of organisational life rather than the exception. We see similar 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, or positioning learning as a product to be acquired or milestone to be passed (‘achieve competency’) (see critiques in Hager 2004a, 2004b and Sfard 1998). We challenge conceptions of learning as propositional knowledge needing to be transferred from one context to another (e.g. from school to work; from one organisation to another). Our own research (e.g. Beckett & Hager 2002; Hager & Halliday 2006) suggests that judgements are context-sensitive and learning is socially determined in holistic organic ways. The more managers can provide opportunities for groups to interact and judge together in increasingly diverse, context-specific ways, the more explicit negotiations become to surface the group’s moral, emotional and rational commitments to work and to each other. 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 organisation’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 organisation. 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 for 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 analyse 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 & 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 organisation.

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 still 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 relations (Smith 2006) in institutional environments – a discursive practice of change. Tsoukas (2005) suggests that there are at least three ways to make sense of organisational change and how it should be managed: the behaviourist, the cognitive 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 organisational studies research. Thinking and acting in organisational 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, p. 101).

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

We tend to undervalue the power of talk in the workplace because it is often a mediating tool to generate other outcomes. In common organisational 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. All of these considerations were evident in our case study.

Moving toward concepts of collective competence and development

The temporality of change shapes individuals’ trajectories for learning (Tanggaard & Elmholdt 2007) and how much they choose to engage 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 to work in the overlaps, will depend on the judgements that individuals and groups make to confront
any skill, knowledge, moral or ethical dilemmas that such actions may bring upon self or influence inter-personal relations with work colleagues.

We believe that competency is not just an acquisition of skills and knowledge issue. Competency is embedded and intertwined in notions of personal and social identity (Jenkins 2004). 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. ‘Becoming’ suggests a relational dependence that goes beyond self in life and work. 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.

(Staff observation on the confidence to cross boundaries)

The recent work of Boreham (2004, 2007) argues for a new vocabulary of competence that incorporates both individual and collective senses of learning and that recognises the interdependency and emergent quality of sense-making in work contexts. Griffiths and Guile (2003) suggest that existing typologies of work experience could be enhanced through conceptualising a connective model that is oriented towards both vertical (disciplinary or specialist) and horizontal (mediating different forms of expertise and demands of different contexts) development. In this model, the development of polycontextual skills (ways of adapting to diverse situations) help to continually re-situate learning or find opportunities for alternative action (Griffiths & Guile 2003, p. 72). These theories are indicative of the value of learning, change and development as co-relative concepts and appear to be finding traction in healthcare settings (Hager 2008; Nagle 1999; Sims & Sims 1993) with the potential for broader organisational diffusion.

We believe our case study 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. Analogously, the conventional divides that separate theory from practice, organisational learning from OD research, HRD from OD research should be debated through more instances of cross-disciplinary research. We may well find that the power of ‘and’, as applied to valued notions of specialisation and competence, highlights opportunities to address gaps in HRD and OD research (Church, Waclawski & Seigel 1999; Stewart 2007), raises the importance of relationality to organisational and HRD research (Bradbury & Lichtenstein 2000; Callahan 2007; Ruona & Gibson 2004) and recognises the holism of learning and development.

Conclusion

Our paper has discussed how working outside the comfort of competence at 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, space and relations that should be further explored in future research.

Acknowledgements

This paper, with a prior longer abstract, was refereed and presented to the Ninth International Conference on Human Resource Development Research and Practice Across Europe held in Lille, France during 21-23 May 2008, where it won the Alan Moon Memorial Prize for best conference paper. The authors appreciate the time and generosity of participants in the corrections centre for sharing their insights, and also acknowledge research funding from an Australian Research Council Discovery grant.
References


Callahan, J 2007, ‘Gazing into the crystal ball: Critical HRD as a future of research in the field’, *Human Resource Development International*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 77–82.


Smith, DE 2006, Institutional ethnography as practice, Rowan & Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland.


Paper presented to the Ninth International Conference on Human Resource Development Research and Practice Across Europe
Co-sponsored by the University Forum for Human Resource Development and the Academy of Human Resource Development
Lille Catholic University
21-23 May, 2008
Lille, France

Winner of the Alan Moon Memorial Prize for best conference paper

AUTHORS

Paul Hager
Professor
UTS: Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of Technology, Sydney
P.O. Box 123
Broadway, NSW 2007
Australia

+612 9514-3826 phone
+612 9514-3737 fax
Paul Hager is Professor of Education in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney. His main scholarly interest is the emerging field of philosophy of adult and vocational education. His work centres on topics such as informal workplace learning, professional practice and the role of generic skills in work, and he has led a range of research projects in these areas. His most recent books are P. Hager and J. Halliday (2006) *Recovering Informal Learning: Wisdom, Judgement and Community* and P. Hager and S. Holland (eds) (2006) *Graduate Attributes, Learning and Employability*, both published by Springer.

Mary C. Johnsson  
UTS: Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences  
University of Technology, Sydney  
P.O. Box 123  
Broadway, NSW 2007  
Australia  
+61 2 9514-3836 phone  
+61 2 9514-3737 fax  
mary.johnsson@uts.edu.au

Mary Johnsson is a doctoral student in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney. Her thesis is investigating the role of relational practices in collective learning. Previously, she worked as a business executive and management consultant for various multinational organisations in the United States and Australia.