Leading from the coach's box: Analysis of an educational intervention

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Abstract

Background and aims: In this digital age newsrooms are constantly looking at how they do what they do and what needs changing. This paper is an analysis of an educational intervention which inquires into what it takes to transform a newsroom. It is a reflection of my own experience as the newsroom's leader, including personal training and development and the actions which arose from that opportunity.

Approach: When fundamental change in a workplace is required, placing it inside learning and motivation can be a natural and empowering process. This intervention illustrates the combined impacts of transformative learning, offers structures for learning and motivation to thrive, illustrates empowering collaboration across workplace cultures to enable expansive learning, and illustrates how a future vision which can motivate a workplace collectively and individually. It outlines tools and methodology which can help impact workplaces, specifically Yrjo Engstrom's Activity Theory, and the concept of Transformative Learning first named in 1974 by Jack Mezirow in his work on adult and ongoing education.

Conclusion: When all the doing of change is taken into account, it is more often the way we are being which has the biggest impact. This paper illustrates that how leaders and others in a workplace are being can be transformative. In my experience, this analysis of an educational intervention's impact on a newsroom underlines the social and economic value of having leaders trained in coaching and mentoring skills.

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION: Profiting from education

This analysis of an educational intervention highlights on effective professional development which empowered learning and motivation in a community news media workplace.

The intervention came at a time of intense pressure for change locally and globally for news media. Catalysts included poor financial performance in the business unit connected with changes, due to digital technology, in the way readers engaged with local community news. I will use Engestrom's (2009) third generation of activity systems to analyse where there were points of contradiction at the site, and which in my experience provided a ripe opportunity for learning and motivation to change a workplace culture.

A further catalyst for change was leadership coaching training undertaken by me as the team leader, prior to and during the 18-month timeframe. The training outside the workplace used transformative education methodology designed to develop my ability to lead by identifying known and unknown blocks to leadership. Mezirow (2009) describes such learning as reformulating meaning structures and I will discuss the impact of this transformative education.

The intervention in the newsroom took the form of three strategies.

First, collaboration will be discussed as empowering change. Other departments in the business unit were invited to contribute to newsroom changes, producing an environment where collaborative expertise referred to by Engestrom can expand learning (cited in Hager & Halliday, 2006, p. 43). My intention was also to have the inexperienced newsroom team members see themselves as a community constantly learning by contributing to each other and becoming bigger collectively and as individuals through this action. Burbules (2006) defines the idea well: "A self-educating community is an experiment in collective intelligence; how the wisdom of the whole can be more than the sum of its parts" (p. 279).

The second was to develop individual visions through one-on-one staff meetings inquiring into their future goals and what their current role could provide on the road to those goals. Alderman (2008) describes these as visions of "possible futures" (p. 136) which can be used to empower. These futures could motivate staff members to expand themselves without reference to me guiding them, which Livingstone (2006) describes as self-directed informal learning.

Finally, my focus as the newsroom leader responsible for informal education in the workplace then became: What do they need from me as a coach and mentor to ensure they are constantly expanding toward that vision? I could take responsibility for instructing the journalists, without sustained reference to a curriculum, but through structure and learning opportunities on the job. This aligns with Livingstone's (2006) definition of informal education and training.

The intervention created an empowering environment by using the four conditions for motivation for learning outlined by Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (cited in McDonald, 2010, p. 2) - "establishing inclusion, developing a positive attitude, enhancing student meaning and engendering competence".

2. DEFINING THE CONTEXT:

Media upheaval

By 2008 the business unit's international parent company was no longer prepared to absorb significant localised. This was due to the dual global pressures of recession and impacts of the internet on New Zealand and Australian operations. The financial pressures on Australasian media organisations highlighted by Zappone (2008) and Macguire (2007) have been mirrored internationally. Tunney & Monaghan's (2010) study of web journalism points to gloomy predictions in Britain including the demise of national dailies, local newspapers and regional radio networks (citing Bell, p. ix) and an equally bleak picture in the United States (citing Perez-Pena, p. ix). Conversely the internet is putting the power of choice in the hands of the media consumer (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel & Olmstead, 2010) and the "proliferation also multiplies the facilities for communication" (Hesmondhalgh, cited in Monaghan & Tunney, 2010, p. 1). An example of the latter which impacts on community newspapers, is that local schools and even the smallest club can establish their own websites to efficiently and effectively communicate with members. Local community newspapers needed to analyse what they were doing and why.

Newsroom in context

The newsroom had a hierarchy of an editor on one tier, a chief sub-editor/designer and a chief reporter on the next tier, and four reporters at the next level. My role was as editor, which given the size of the organisation was a hands-on position in an open plan environment. All other members of the team were inexperienced in newspapers, although the two newsroom leaders on the tier below editor were in their mid-30s, therefore in my

experience I could rely on their life-wide and lifelong learning. As discussed by Alheit in his summary of the European Commission's Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, the two contributed formal, non-formal and informal learning to which they had been exposed. (European Commission, cited in Alheit, 2009, p. 117).

Leadership in context

My ability to change my newsroom leadership arose out of personally investing in training and development for myself. The programme was through a private provider which bases its methodology on transformative learning. I had begun its leadership coaching programme designed to develop my coaching skills. Kegan (2009) outlines transformational learning as "changes in *how* we know", as opposed to informational learning, "changes in *what* we know" (p.43). My training inquiry was into how I knew about my coaching of team members. I was able to use my ongoing development in the programme to transform the way I coached in the newsroom.

The structure of the programme was a mix of formal classrooms and informal activity. It involved me coaching individuals in a leadership programme which I had previously completed. In turn I was coached on my coaching, by programme leaders, using observation and statistics to measure effectiveness. This system fits Lave and Wenger's description of "intentional informal learning activities through direct observation" (cited in Livingstone, 2006, p. 217). The most transformational instance of this learning came in an observation of my coaching that I did not appear to trust myself, or those I was coaching. This observation opened up the opportunity for an inquiry which had me realise that through incidents from childhood to adulthood, I had created a lack of trust for myself and others as an automatic way of being, which I did not recognise. Out of this life-altering point, labelled by Mezirow as "perspective transformation" (cited in Livingstone, 2006, p.217), I was able to re-form my meaning forming by deliberate effort that Kegan (2009) suggests is the intersection of transformational learning and constructive developmentalism.

The deliberate effort which addressed it is mirrored in Heron's "Reversal learning cycle", and particularly the point raised regarding strategy which "anticipates and educates before the event" (Reason & Heron, cited in Heron, 2009, p. 139). The strategy I used was to anticipate and educate by imagining how things could be different as suggested by Mezirow (2009), so I created a possible future of being an inspirational leader. I also put in place the trigger phrase "he/she is safe with me, and I am safe with them" in a coaching situation whenever I sensed a personal reaction developing. For example a thought might create a loss of power, or physical reaction such as

perspiration, anger or frustration. This is a reaction which has increasingly lessened as I have become the author of my environment. This self-regulating motivational tool is also referred to as "self-directed talk" (Harris; Rohrkemper; cited in Alderman, 2008, p. 145). The combination of these two strategies represented a growth in emotional intelligence skills such as empathy which Cherniss (2008) recommends for the development of mentors and coaches. One personal unrelated thoughts, feelings and emotions are removed, there is a greater ability to be with the other person and identify what they may need.

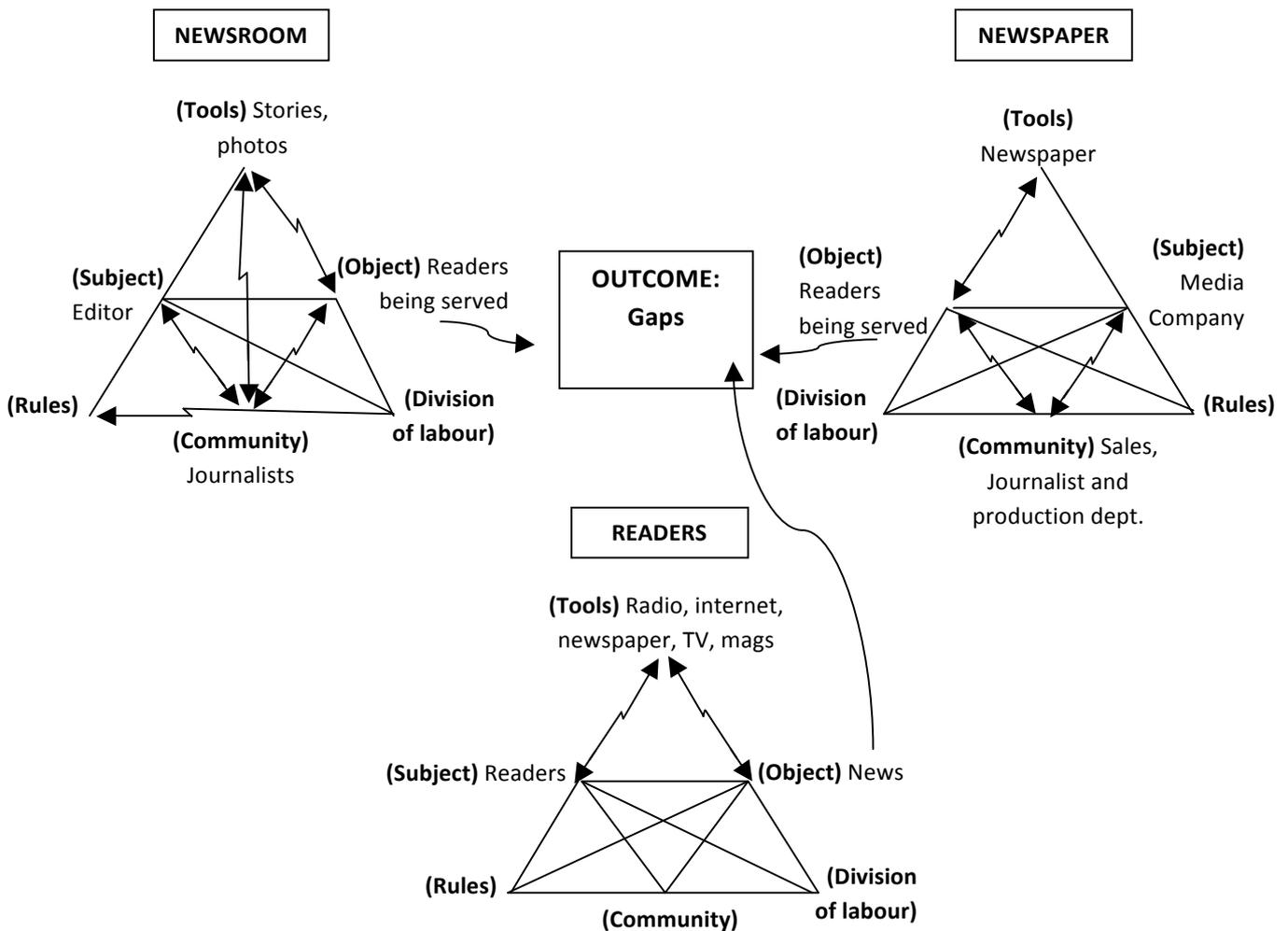**Contradictions in activity systems context**

Figure 1: Three interacting activity systems identify the contradictions which became opportunities for innovative attempts to change the activity

Figure 1 is a diagram which uses Engestrom's (2009) third generation of activity theory for expansive learning to illustrate issues impacting the workplace. This system of analysis was not used at the time of the intervention, but looking in retrospect, it is a perfect tool to illustrate the possible contradictions which were addressed. Therefore I would recommend it as a tool for newsroom leaders to provide clarity in their

thinking for the development and maintenance of workplace training and development. For the purposes of this analysis, I have contained my focus to just one of the activity systems, the "Newsroom", although the Actions and Reactions subheading in this paper will illustrate the impact this focus can have on the other linked sytems and therefore what the newsroom has to be aware of.

The triangles in Figure 1 reflect three connected activity systems – "Newsroom", "Newspapers", and "Readers and Advertisers". The points around the triangle, and their intersecting lines, help focus on complex interrelations between subjects and their community. In this case, with the Newsroom, the "subject" is myself, the editor; the "object" is the readers being served; the "mediating artifacts" are stories, photographs and the newspaper itself; the "community" is the team of reporters; the "rules" are the way we did things; and the "divisions of labour" are roles in the newsroom.

Broken or jagged lines illustrate contradictions in the activity system which can be addressed individually. These also represent an opportunity for expansive learning. As Engestrom (2009) puts it, "contradictions generate disturbances and conflicts, but also innovative attempts to change the activity" (p. 57). The notes which follow the diagram explain the contradictions.

Newsroom activity lines of conflict:

Editor (subject)–reporters (community): This point of contradiction related to my ability to trust myself and others.

Journalists (community)–readers (object): Journalists were not fully aware of the demographics of their geographical area and therefore stories may not reflect and serve the community.

Journalists (community) –stories, photos, newspaper (tools/mediating artefact): Stories, photos and the newspaper overall were not necessarily serving the reader.

Journalists (community)–rules: Addressing contradictions would require new rules of operation in the newsroom.

Stories (mediating artefacts)–readers (object): The incorrect type and mix of stories was identified as a contradiction to be addressed.

Newspapers lines of conflict

Readers (object)–newspaper (tools/mediating artefacts): Readers were spending less time connecting with the local weekly newspaper as a source of local news, given the digital connectedness people have with their communities of choice, for example schools, clubs.

Community–readers: There was a disconnection between the community comprising editorial, advertising and production departments, and readers and advertisers.

Community–parent company: The connection of editorial, advertising and productions departments with the parent organisation was not strong due to financial results and this impacted on motivation.

Readers and Advertisers lines of conflict

Readers (object)–media (tools/mediating artefacts): As the number and type of tools has developed for people sourcing news (newspaper, radio, TV, internet), readers have had increasing choice, which can conversely be a confusion of too much choice.

News sources (subject)–media (tools): Organisations, whether a media business, a local council, club or school, are spoiled for choice for tools to use in delivering news, but they also have to manage the fragmentation which can arise.

3. DEFINING ACTIONS AND REACTIONS:

The actions and reactions fall under three sub-headings:

1. Collaborative expertise to expand learning.
2. Creating visions of possible futures to motivate self-directed learning.
3. Leadership by walking alongside the learners.

Collaborative expertise to expand learning

I requested both the newsroom team and the other departments join me in the possibility of creating a template for what the world's community newspapers might look like in the future. As Elkjaer (2009) points out, this aligns with Dewey's concept of learning, creating ideas about action and verbalising them. The following sets of actions were used to have the staff engaged as a community of practice, in other words talking to "sustain mutual engagement in action" (Wenger, 2009, p. 211):

Define demographics and content –workshops were held with newsroom, sales and production staff to 1) identify readership demographics for the individual community newspapers; 2) define the types of stories those demographics may be interested in; 3) identify what we were doing well, what we were not doing well, and a wish list of what we could do in the future;

Create a possible future – From the workshops, the newsroom leaders who were myself, the chief sub-editor/designer and the chief reporter developed a package for content and design, plus a structure to ensure the content was delivered each week to match the demographics for each newspaper;

Feedback and implementation on the possible future – We went back to the departments to outline the future actions and take feedback before implementation.

These actions addressed three areas of learning and motivation:

Understanding – The entire business helped to create and understand how and why each editorial change was going to be made to address each publication's connection with the community. Everyone was then able to engage with the community and be a champion for this connection. The journalists could then deliver what was required for the people in their area - for example when different styles of writing were appropriate and use of photographs. This achieved what Gardner (2009) describes as multiple approaches to understanding, because we focused on not only what we wanted, but on what the readers and advertisers wanted and how they viewed what we did.

Motivation - Working through the challenges of planning and implementation together over an 18-month period was an empowering process for the workplace. Hull & Schultz (2002) point to this when they talk of communities and cultures taking a journey through which problems are ameliorated (citing Flower; Flower, Long & Higgings; Peck, Flower & Higgins; Engestrom; p. 38). Out of the collective process a structure was developed to enable reporters to have clear direction on what was expected of them each week. Given the age and inexperience of the reporters this aligns with Zeihe's (2009) call for structure around goals for young people which are clearly achievable as motivation.

Non-formal and informal learning - This structure also allowed for the design of a simple visual display tool to measure actions across the newsroom. The display tool was a one-page A3 sheet of paper for each week showing the type and number of stories required for each of the newspapers and the tick-off list of demographics for each newspaper. Given

that one reporter was responsible for a newspaper each, this was a "benchmark" which allowed me to see "patterns of intentional informal learning and training" and understanding "to track trends" as called for by Livingstone (2006, p. 221). This process also used the visual display structure to plan together a week or more ahead for stories. It was my intention to create a newsroom of individuals feeding off and contributing to each other. As an example, before going on a job, it became standard practice for a reporter to check with a peer or newsroom leader on the questions they would ask, or structuring of photographs, to create every opportunity for expansion. The learning therefore, became socially and culturally situated as discussed by Fuller et all (cited in Hager & Halliday, 2009, p. 43).

Creating visions of possible futures;
Leadership by walking alongside the learners

I have combined these two sections because they were inextricably linked in the process. Parallel to the collaboration I ran an individual process of one-on-one meetings with each newsroom member to establish a vision of a possible self (Alderman, 2008). This was designed to support their own self-regulation and for me as a coach and mentor to clearly address in their "becoming bigger" (Kegan, 2009) through the newsroom's informal education process.

There were two other sides to this process. First it allowed me to become a "connected knower", seeing through another's eyes (Belenky, cited in Mezirow, 2009, p. 99). Second that connection was recognised by the participants and they responded to the coaching and support. Connection is summed up in a relevant, albeit different cultural context when Bishop and Berryman talk of Maori students valuing teachers who "walk alongside them" (cited in Bourke, 2008, p. 160).

Following are the individual actions and reactions:

Individual one's vision of a possible self was to learn, show his talent and step up to a more senior role in the organisation. He also loved the challenge of designing. The extrinsic motivations of a bigger and better job appeared to blend with intrinsic creative motivation. My experience suggests his intrinsic motivations were conative, or related to individually developed goals, as outlined by McDonald (2010). My mentoring and coaching of him involved a balance of explaining editorial design reasoning while at the same time giving him freedom to introduce his own flair, plus involving him in and explaining to him unfamiliar editorial decision-making. He achieved his goals – he was identified for a promotion within

the organisation, and his design work was considered as a possible template for community newspapers in the group throughout New Zealand.

Individual two was highly motivated to learn with what in my experience as an editor appeared to be a blend of extrinsic and intrinsic factors. My observation was that he enjoyed praise, which was a good example where extrinsic and intrinsic overlap, as suggested by McDonald (2010) - the external praise acts on the emotion of "increasing feeling good" (p. 4). From our one-on-one session he made it clear he saw editor as a possible future self, which suggests he had a well developed "ability and effort attribution" (Borkowski & Thorpe, cited in Alderman, P. 140). Journalism was a mid-life change of career for this individual. My being aware of what Kegan (2009) describes as the bridges he had already crossed, assisted my mentoring and coaching of him. This included explaining and involving him in news decision-making. Two years after the beginning of the intervention, he was appointed to the editor's position when I left.

Individual three had not been performing satisfactorily prior to the intervention based on my subjective assessment as an editor. Our one-on-one meeting revealed three key factors. First was a gap in her training I had been unaware of, so I did not have a full picture of the bridge she had previously crossed, as Kegan (2009) recommends to educators. I targeted my coaching to accommodate this. Secondly she was not motivated to do the job, so there was no expectancy of value in the role and therefore no interest to sustain involvement (Eccles and Wigfield, cited in McDonald, 2010, p. 10). Thirdly she saw her future possible self as a women's magazine writer and editor. To address the second and third issue, I developed two strategies – one to ongoingly coach her to see that everything she did in the community journalist role could be translated as learning to the role of her future self, and the second to create a fashion, arts and entertainment section in the newspapers which drew on her talents and her own stated vision of her future self. Her new context and culture of the fashion, arts and entertainment fields became empowering for her, as Hull & Schultz (2002) suggest it can. The structure of the A3 benchmark planning tool allowed me to keep track of her informal newsroom education. For example I was able to see a pattern of the types of stories she did not like doing so I was able to provide coaching to interrupt this. Conversely it became clear that she was developing a strong network of contacts in her area, a skill and attribute which would be critical to success in her future self in magazines. When she moved overseas 18 months after the intervention began, I was able to tell her that I was comfortable being a referee for her, something I would not have been confident doing at the start.

Individual four joined the team about six months after the intervention. For an inexperienced journalist she quickly showed a remarkable trait for identifying stories and fronting up to difficult interviews. However my assessment as editor was that she had deficiencies in producing complete, well-rounded stories, attention to detail and accuracy in spelling and grammar and a lack of time management. I initially worked closely with her, coaching her to slow down, pay attention to detail and plan her stories. The results were excellent – but they quickly became sporadic. On reflection I realise that I did not work with her to uncover her motivating possible future self. As Alderman points out, "when students' views about the future are unclear, their current behaviour is more likely to be governed by whatever is happening in the moment" (2008, p. 140).This case also highlights the fact that there was a disconnection in our community of practise for which there were no mechanisms, as outlined by Lave and Wenger (cited in Hager & Halliday, 2006, p. 42), in the new structure to ensure a new member was fully empowered in the newsroom culture.

Individual five joined the team about the time the intervention began and his possible future self declared in our one-on-one meeting was to write fiction. My observation suggests he fits into Dweck, Chiu & Hong's finding that people can hold different types of self theories in different domains (cited in Dweck & Master, 2008, p. 33). For example he was initially extremely shy and in my experience did not appear to view social situations as learning opportunities, suggesting an entity, or fixed theory around shyness (Beer, cited in Dweck & Master 2008, p. 35). However, at the time of joining us, he was putting himself back through the tough process of learning shorthand, a goal he achieved. This suggests that in one sphere, his view of his intelligence was malleable. At my recommendation, he took part in the same foundation course using transformative education methodology that I had experienced. The shift was "epochal", which Mezirow (2009, p. 94) describes as a sudden shift. In my observation, his willingness to seek assistance and contribute to the newsroom brainstorming illustrated the shift to an incremental theory around shyness. However as Heron (2009) suggests, reversing a way of being requires reinforcement and also having others committed to your new future. Therefore I became a reinforcing partner for his possible new self, which became far more social and confident. As Dweck & Master suggest, self theories are relatively stable beliefs when left alone, but they can also be changed with targeted interventions.

4. CONCLUSION: Education, a capital idea

There can be various measures of success for this educational intervention. In bald economic terms, the newspapers were not financially viable when the intervention began in mid-2008, and by mid-2010 they were consistently breaking even. Advertising is the only source of revenue for free weekly community newspapers and therefore revenue can a vivid measure of success. Therefore it must be pointed out that there were also major changes initiated by management in sales, production, staffing and financial areas which had were critical elements. However it can be argued that to some extent the financial viability was helped by greater reader and advertiser satisfaction with the product – in other words, the contradictions illustrated in the activity systems (Figure 1) were resolved.

This analysis, therefore, illustrates the combined results of successful collaboration in the workplace and greater self-directed learning through motivation. As Ginsberg and Wlodkowski discuss, with the right motivational conditions in place, "when educators plan carefully, the conditions form a set of intersecting dimensions that simultaneously and reciprocally interact to influence motivation and learning within and across cultural groups" (cited in McDonald 2010, p. 2).

Cultural differences between editorial, sales and production staff were blurred by the request for input and understanding from all staff. The collaboration produced a clear illustration of shared expertise contributing to collective intelligence and expanding learning. This provided a solid foundation for myself as both a learner and leader to coach other learners in creating personal future visions. In turn these became the base for their self-directed informal learning.

In my experience, the analysis underlines the social and economic value of having leaders trained in coaching and mentoring skills. This avenue of future inquiry could follow Alheit's (2009) call for a new measurement of "education economy", or what he labels "a social ecology of learning" (p. 122). Alheit suggests this could offer a balance between the often opposing arguments for social capital and economic capital measurement.

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