Infusing Training with Meaningfulness: An Essential Pairing for Learning?

Laura Holyoke, Heather Ebba Maib, and Tricia Gehrlein
University of Idaho

Abstract: Professional development in higher education is increasingly shifting to online formats. However, online professional development often does not lend itself well to fostering meaningful human interconnection. Taking a constructivist approach, we share findings from a qualitative research study that explored what participants found meaningful in a professional development training based on creating biocratic organizations designed for a student services department. We explain how research findings can be applied to designing and delivering professional development to workgroups.

Keywords: meaning, engagement, professional work-team development

Professional development in higher education is increasingly shifting to online formats. While these approaches often fulfill regulatory training requirements by providing necessary information to employees, they do not necessarily translate into meaningful and engaging learning opportunities. Relearning ways of establishing important human interconnection drives a need to explore how to create meaningful professional development experiences. In this paper, we share preliminary findings from a research study focusing on what participants found meaningful in a professional development training we designed for a higher education student services department. We also share our process of developing and delivering the training and how we incorporated a continuous feedback loop tailoring to the participants' ongoing learning needs (Bloom, 2020). Results from this study underscore the significance of creating innovative professional development opportunities for adult learners that engage them meaningfully. We employ adult learning theories through a trauma-informed perspective and explain how the findings are applied to professional and team development training design.

Related Literature

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, high attrition rates among student services personnel in higher education was a growing concern (Mullen et al., 2018). In the wake of the pandemic, a mass resignation has occurred across professional sectors; however, student service and student affairs professionals in post-secondary education are resigning at such high rates, which has been termed the "mass exodus" (Ellis, 2021). Empathy-based stressors could explain the departures from the profession. Vicarious and secondary trauma and compassion fatigue are categorized by Rauvola et al. (2019) as "empathy-based stress." Empathy-based stress "is a stressor–strain-based process of trauma at work, wherein exposure to secondary or indirect trauma, combined with empathic experience, results in empathy-based strain" (Rauvola et al., 2019, p. 299).

People working in trauma-exposed professions can experience vicarious and secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout that may lead to poor decision-making and impact organizational cultures lacking adequate leadership support (Tyler, 2012; Hormann & Vivian, 2005; Handran, 2015). Employees who feel supported and empowered by the organization have

a lower risk of burnout and secondary trauma (Handran, 2015). Higher education institutions try to support the organization's psychological safety to curb the impact of empathy-based stress on employees. "When [psychological safety] is low, [people] shut down, self-censor, and redirect their energy toward risk management, pain avoidance, and self-preservation" (Clark, 2020, p. 5). High levels of psychological safety are vital to an organization's success (Clark, 2020). Fostering an organizational culture that acknowledges the complexity is essential to a psychologically safe environment. According to Bloom (2020):

> organizational health is an evolving human resource that helps the organization and everyone who comprises it to adapt to the challenges of every life […] feel a sense of well-being and interact with their surroundings in ways that promote successful development. (p. 5)

In short, human complexity is woven into organizations. Thus, developing our organizations in a way that is significant and meaningful to the living beings within them is essential.

Meaning embraces how people interpret or apply sensemaking to situations they encounter in life (Martela & Steger, 2016). Meaning in life is unique to each person and often changes based on the moment (Frankl, 1970). King and Hicks (2021) purported that meaning in life involves three elements: coherence, purpose, and significance. Coherence is realized when different components of life, such as behaviors and values, logically align and make sense (King & Hicks, 2021). Purpose signifies having goals and a direction in life; it drives motivation into action by pursuing, for example, a vocation, cause, or life experience in a way that contributes to meaningfulness in life (Klinger, 1977). Finally, significance is the extent to which a person believes their life is worth living (Martela & Steger, 2016).

The training and learning transfer literature recognizes a need to utilize intentional and mindful approaches to supporting learners in making connections by scaffolding the concepts (Brent, 2011). Facilitators "practicing thoughtful approaches towards learning transfer are more likely to see it occur" (Thomas, 2007, p. 6). Among factors identified by Broad and Newstrom (1992), adapting the curriculum to meet learners' needs and understanding the organization's cultural and social context is critical to helping learners integrate knowledge (as cited in Brion, 2022). To grow, a learner must have an appropriate balance of challenge and support (Sanford, 1966). Often, meaningful professional development occurs when people are allowed to sit with uncomfortable concepts (Attebury, 2017). However, successful integration transpires when learners are given space to *safely* practice their learning (Roumell, 2019).

Research Design

In 2018, two members of the research team began developing training curricula on trauma-informed student services and leadership. Variations of the training were delivered at practitioner conferences for educational opportunities programs in 2019 and 2020. Since 2019, our team has tailored the curricula to meet client needs and the organizations they represent. During fall of 2021, the client approached a member of our research team after attending their conference session. The client wanted to provide their *work team* with an intentional and meaningful professional development opportunity after the team's intense experience of organizational change and uncertainty. In the wake of a prolonged pandemic and institutional changes, their team was experiencing burnout and empathy-based stress.

The client and training/research team met early in 2022 to discuss learning objectives and desired training outcomes. The client requested we shift from strictly trauma-informed concepts to incorporate topics like team values, communication, and establishing group norms. As the research team and trainers, we adapted existing curriculum to include topics and exercises that meet the client's needs. The concepts of safety, trust, and transparency, and guiding principles of trauma-informed care were vital curriculum components (SAMHSA, 2014). Central to the curriculum design was Sandra Bloom's (2020) framework for creating healthy *biocratic* organizations. The word, biocratic combines elements of biology, a complex and adaptive living system that functions using healthy democratic practices (Bloom, 2020). In addition to professional development, we designed the training to emphasize personal development. Throughout the training, we incorporated practices in relational mindfulness and concepts that support understanding the interpersonal relational space, such as empathy and validation.

Table 1

Organismic Biocracy: Fostering a Healthy Workplace Curriculum Outline

Schedule	Topics	Learning Activities
Day One	o Group Agreements o Johari Window o Personal Communication Style o Margin Equation o Team Well-being	▪ Safety, Belonging, Vulnerability, Gratitude ▪ Communication Style Assessment ▪ What I bring -- What I need
Day Two	o Understanding Reactivity o Mindfulness Concepts o Relational Mindfulness o Compassion o Validation	▪ Savoring: cup of tea meditation ▪ "What brings you joy?" ▪ Video: "Empathy vs. Sympathy" ▪ "Just like me" exercise ▪ RAIN
Day Three	o Understanding Stress o Burnout vs Compassion Fatigue o Safety at Work o Trust and Transparency o Organizational Justice o Appreciation Languages o Grounding	▪ S.T.O.P ▪ Languages of Appreciation at work
Day Four	o Well-being o Relationship with Time o Organizational Culture o Task and Maintenance o Self and Team-Care	▪ Reflection: What does well-being look like? ▪ Reflection: Team values and norms ▪ Team-care approaches ▪ Revisit "I bring, I need"

Data Collection and Analysis

We provided the training in four-hour segments, in four days spread over two weeks, during spring 2022. The training was delivered remotely via Zoom due to public health restrictions related to COVID-19. We used a generic qualitative design (Kahlke, 2014) and census sampling

to collect information from all participants. Our research team collected two kinds of data, individual written reflections, and recorded group debriefings. Questions for individual reflection were assigned the first three days. The daily reflection prompts aimed to understand what each participant thought was important and meaningful that they wanted to incorporate into their personal and professional lives. Three participants submitted written reflections after the first and second sessions; one submitted a reflection after the third session. Participants submitted images of their handwritten daily reflections electronically and transferred into typed documents. All four participants and the trainers engaged in debriefing sessions during the final 20 minutes of the four daily trainings. The debriefing sessions were recorded via Zoom and transcribed using online transcription software. Individual written reflections were combined by prompt, organized by day, and input into a shared spreadsheet.

We approached our data analysis using Srivastava and Hopwood's (2009) reflexive iteration framework. A reflexive iterative framework is an adaptable approach to analysis that emphasizes the importance of "visiting and revisiting the data" (p. 77) using a reflexive process. Our research team adapted the framework by engaging in the process as a group, which allowed us to openly reflect, critique, and assess our individual relationships with the research questions and collected data. As recommended by Srivastava and Hopwood (2009), during our weekly research team meetings we repeatedly asked what the data revealed and understanding how it meaningfully connected to what we sought to know. Our research team also inductively coded and analyzed transcripts independently to prepare for weekly meetings supporting further analyst triangulation (Patton, 2015). Approaching reflexive analysis through the lens of multiple perspectives aided data triangulation (Patton, 1999).

Preliminary Findings

Our analysis revealed that participants grew both personally and professionally. Reflections often revealed insights into what individuals needed to learn but were unaware they were missing certain concepts and skills. Participants often remarked that adopting an open positive attitude reinforced during the training made them focus on their own experience and not compare to others. Participants held space for one another in a way that invited brave authenticity.

Meeting the needs of the inner self meets group needs. The group's work first met self-needs that, in turn, met the group's needs. Participants engaged with curiosity and open minds, genuinely setting aside work tasks and personal agendas to cultivate self-discovery. Increasing self-awareness allowed others to see one another clearly and hear what individual group members needed. For example, the activity called *I bring, I need*; created space for participants to highlight the strengths they bring to the group and voice what they need from the group to strengthen their team. In other words, participants' self-discovery created space to understand self in the relational context of others.

Common language leads to effective communication. Through several activities, we introduced concepts that required specific language that the group could use, knowing they had a shared understanding of the language. For example, we taught the *human margin equation* (Swenson, 2004), which uses a mathematical equation to describe an individual's capacity to carry out additional tasks. Swenson explained that every person has resources, such as time, money,

energy, support, etc., that contribute to how much they can accomplish. Likewise, people have load that may be internal or external. External load refers to tasks that need completing, bills, dependents, and errands; personal expectations about performance are an example of internal load. Margin is the remaining amount of energy when load is subtracted from resources. Margin can be expressed in human terms as positive or negative. If people can add tasks to their load, they are in a positive margin. On the other hand, if a person has more tasks than resources, they are in a negative margin and should not agree to additional work. This common language gave participants shared meaning without having to explain details or feel guilty for turning down a request that would take time.

Small everyday practices make significant impacts. Participants' expressed curiosity about what they noticed in the dynamic between trainers and how well we worked together across our power differential (the lead trainer is a mentee and student of the other trainer). The group observed us model shared power and small, yet significant ways we expressed appreciation for the work and expertise of one another. As trainers, we practiced humanity with each other by giving each other grace to make mistakes and embrace imperfection. Participants noted that by observing the trainers, they were more able to engage in self-compassion and compassion for each other that they expressed by demonstrating a profound appreciation for each other's humanity.

Discussion

Approximately a year ago, we developed and researched the Organismic Biocracy training with a team of student services personnel at a community college. Initial findings reinforce a need to design training that accentuates the significance of creating mutual respect and support and identify training resources that champion a learning environment (Knowles, 1975). Using a trauma-informed perspective, we employed adult learning theories to analyze professional and team development. Our next research steps are to revisit the student services group who participated in the training and engage them in a post-training group reflection and individual interviews to ascertain which concepts and practices have been integrated into their team.

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