QUALITATIVE RESEARCH INTO THE CONCEPT OF COMMONSENSE IN WORKPLACE LEARNING AND EXPERIENCE

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Work practices in workplace learning and training often assume that people act with reason, knowledge and commonsense in their professional lives. Considerable effort has been made over time by focussing on workplace learning per se, how it occurs, what occurs and when it occurs, but little has been done to understand how people work and learn using commonsense. Using Lonegan's concept of insight this presentation will demonstrate how commonsense learning should be a part of work place education and training along with theoretical knowledge. It will report on the use of a distinctive phenomenographic approach to researching commonsense in workplace training and will demonstrate at least seven different variations of people in a regional and rural environment to using commonsense in their work experience and learning. Implications from these results will be drawn for curricula development in workplace learning and education.

Introduction

A recent newspaper article entitled Common sense makes a comeback (and it's about time) (Kavanagh 1999) draws our attention to the fact that workplaces are complex environments and that human behaviour within them varies according to the quality of the decision making that occurs during normal work practices. This presentation attempts to clarify the nature of common sense in workplace learning in regard to concepts such as intuition and insight, and to demonstrate how it is understood by workers in different rural and manufacturing industries.

A starting point in analysing the literature is to consider the concept of insight and from that to develop the place of common sense in workplace knowledge. The concept of insight was defined by Lonergan (1957) as consisting of theoretical and common sense knowledge. Theoretical knowledge (Stewart 1996, p.19) consists of "knowing things in relation to other things and in their mutual interactions." Here the chief concern is with knowing truth, ie. knowing for the sake of knowing. Commonsense knowledge was defined by Lonergan (1980, p. 111) as:

Commonsense, then, consists of a basic nucleus of insights that enables a person to deal successfully with personal and material situations of the sort that arise in his ordinary living, according to the standards of the culture and the class to which he belongs.

This "basic nucleus of insights" has been clarified by Stewart (1996, p.14) as consisting of a grouping of the ways of understanding that hold to do specific actions, eg. knowing how to operate a computer or a digital video camera. In these situations, people operate in a world of immediacy by close reference to both the practical and the concrete aspects of such actions. These are aspects that are associated with situations that have arisen and been experienced in the workers' ordinary lives. Lonergan (1957, p.173), therefore, affirms that intelligence is not the province of scientists and scholars alone, for:
... one meets intelligence in every walk of life. There are intelligent farmers and craftsmen, intelligent employers and workers, intelligent technicians and mechanics, intelligent doctors and lawyers, intelligent politicians and diplomats ...

Therefore, the author notes (Gerber, in press) that people of common sense: have insights into problems, weigh up different courses of action, form sensible judgements and make responsible decisions because the world of common sense often lacks order or discipline. Consequently, people have to learn for themselves using a hit-and-miss approach since "Insights are acquired not in the precise, ordered, rigorous way of scientific inquiry that leads to general or 'universal' knowledge" (Stewart 1996, p.16).

We may conclude, therefore, that both theoretical knowledge and common sense knowledge are each specialisations of intelligence. As Stewart (1996, p.20) reminds us, in each form of knowing the conscious person experiences, understands and judges, but the field of consciousness differs in the two cases. Common sense knowledge is knowing for the sake of doing, theoretical knowledge is knowing for the sake of knowing.

Consequently, in workplace learning people use ordinary, not technical, language to address the workplace challenge at hand, eg. deciding how to repair a non-functioning part of an assembly line. The goal of the use of common sense in workplace learning is to achieve a practical result, eg. learning how to fix an assembly line. Such knowledge learned from fixing the assembly line may be transferred to varying kinds of work and used to address similar challenges in their work or in their wider lives. Such knowledge is common because its practical results are understand and used by other workers in actual work situations. This means that common sense knowing is situated in particular work contexts, eg. in an aircraft cockpit, on a football field, in a dental surgery or in a manufacturing assembly line. As Stewart (1996:17) states: "Common sense provides us with its fund of facts, its information, its certainties." These forms of information vary with the work done and represent smart and practical ways to complete the work successfully.

Forguson (1989, p.157) adds to this understanding of common sense by focussing on the concept of the common-sense view of the world as "a shared network of beliefs about the world and our solution to it, which is expressed in virtually all of our thought and behaviour." Cognitive abilities including: the ability to engage in meta-representation; making appearance – reality distinctions; recognising representational diversity; and understanding representational change. Workers should be able to use these basic abilities to make judgements about how things vary, change and differ in appearance as they do their work tasks.

The literature dealing with insight includes more concepts than common sense. In particular, the concept of intuition rates very highly. Day (1996) addresses intuition as our sixth sense. She declares that it differs from other senses because we can perceives things without relying on our senses. Specifically, she defines intuition as "a nonlinear, nonempirical process of gaining and interpreting information in response to questions." (Day 1996, p.83) It is nonlinear because intuition does not proceed in logical steps. It is nonempirical because it involves drawing conclusions instinctively. It interprets information instead of merely gathering it. Finally, it requires a question to act as a trigger for focusing on the information in the world.
Most understandings of intuition do, however, focus on the relationship between insight and intuition. Bastick (1982) viewed insight and intuition interchangeably and declared twenty differing properties of insight and intuition. Shirley and Langan-Fox (1996, p.564) attempted to refine these properties by declaring that insight meant to be "instantly aware of something which one has been approaching with rational thinking" while intuition was defined as "a feeling of knowing with certitude on the basis of inadequate information and without conscious awareness of rational thinking." Bowers, Farvolden and Mermigis (1995, pp.29-30) saw intuition as "the perception of clues to coherence that tacitly activates and guides thought toward an insight or hunch about the nature of the coherence in question". They see two "conceptually distinct" phases in the process of problem solving to describe the distinction between intuition and insight: an initial, intuitive phase which they define as "a graded process of activating responses that are stimulated by, and increasingly appropriate to, the available pattern of clues; and an insight phase which involves "a conscious recognition, often quite sudden, that a particular response constitutes a potential solution to a problem". (page 31). Finally, Parikh (1994) views intuition as something that is situated, ie. it varies in different areas of knowledge. To demonstrate the multi-dimensional nature of intuition he identified intuition as: insight or knowledge in philosophy; process or skills in epistemology; attitude or a trait in psychology; creative expressions in the arts; chemical processes in neuroscience; and as altered states of consciousness in mysticism (page 26). He goes on to state that authentic intuition is not: instinct, impulse, ingenuity, inspiration, intellect or intelligence or inclination or wishful thinking. Such intuition involves the following symptoms: a kind of warmth, comfort, comfort or vibration of positive energy; an intense quality of clarity or certainty in the mind; a compulsive urge or feeling of excitement as a consequence of intuition; and some kind of heightened consciousness (pages 42 - 43).

What these references do is to highlight that intelligent actions are understood various by theorists and that there is a degree of confusion as to what is the real difference between common sense and other forms of knowing. However, I would suggest that there is sufficient evidence to conclude that although Bastick declared twenty interchangeable properties between insight and intuition, distinctions may be drawn between intuition, theoretical knowing and common sense. The relationship between theoretical and common sense knowledge is bound up in the concept of insight. There is sufficient evidence to conclude that such a thing as common sense does exist in regard to knowing. It should, therefore, be able to be uncovered in different life-world situations, including the world of work. The challenge in the remainder of this article is to demonstrate how this may be done in different workplace situations.

**A study of commonsense knowing in workplaces**

Using the theoretical understandings expressed above, an empirical investigation was undertaken with 56 adult workers of considerable experience in their jobs who were employed in manufacturing paper in Tasmania, and in a wide range of rural occupations in regional New South Wales. Each person was interviewed using a semi-structured format that was based on accepted phenomenological principles to share his or her experience of using common sense in their workplaces. A phenomenographic analysis was conducted of the resulting transcribed data to search for qualitative differences in the group's experience of common sense in their work. Such an analysis focuses on the relationships that have emerged between the workers' experience of common sense in their various work situations. The analysis revealed seven different conceptions of the
workers' experience of common sense. These saw common sense as: a gut feeling; an innate ability; as knowing how; as learning; as using others; as demonstrable abilities; and as personal attributes. Each of these variations or conceptions provides a piece in the jigsaw of the experience of common sense in workplaces. A closer analysis of the results in each conception will be conducted in the following sections.

a) Common sense as a gut feeling
The experience of common sense as a gut feeling was expressed in several ways by the people in this study. This gut feeling or actions based on first impressions was expressed as sensing that a decision was correct or appropriate based on one's instincts or beliefs. This gut feeling about common sense is grounded in knowing that one's decision that one is right when deciding what to do and how to do it. It was seen to be related to one's intuition. It seems to be a rather quick action in terms of thinking about whether the decision and action is correct or not. This point was made by the following worker:

*I know I don't sit down and ponder every decision that I make, you know, whether it is the right thing or the wrong thing or, you know, in depth. I just, you know, often weigh up the situation, make a decision and I would still think that it goes back to intuition. You think that is the right decision.*

b) Common sense as innate ability
A number of people felt that there is something innate about common sense that cannot be ignored. They were not able to define this innate ability. Rather, they were able to identify its presence when it occurred in workplace activities. In fact, these people placed more emphasis on the benefits of possessing this natural ability in the workplace than on trying to clarify its components or how it developed. Ultimately, when cornered they came back to a genetic consideration as one means of explaining this ability. The following statements demonstrate what these people thought was relevant about common sense as an innate ability:

*I think that it is a great attribute to have common sense when you're gaining experience. But, again I'm not sure that you can teach common sense. Common sense is to me something that you're born with. All I know is that if you've got common sense then experience is easier to experience.*

*Common sense is a gift, some blokes have common sense and some don’t. When I was working overseas I had three guys working for me. Two had PhDs and one had a Masters in microbiology and I was there with almost no qualifications at all, and I used to examine why I was the manager and they were the workers, if you like. The reason was that two of the three lacked common sense and the company must have identified that. In their own field of research they were very very good. Once they stepped out of that environment they had no common sense.*

c) Common sense as knowing how
Considerable variation was discovered in the groups' responses in their declarations that common sense does have a knowledge component that is expressed in different people's conscious decision-making or reflection on their actions, ie. knowing that they know something (almost metacognitive by nature) in their work experiences. Such knowledge was based more on the actions and decisions that are made in their work. It was more a competence or a capacity to be able to do something in their work rather than knowing something for its own sake. This knowing was declared in the following ways:
i) taking risks:
Getting to be a successful business person a lot of common sense must be used. I think that a lot of our business is management. Before we make a decision, what risks could occur or could flow on from this decision? Like our pre-season ordering of combine harvesters ... instigate and think of, now only just now but what will happen when these arrive and you may have to cancel an order ... what would happen if these machines arrive and there is a severe drought. Put some hurdles in front of you, think before you make the decision.

ii) thinking through things:
I think that common sense is such an important thing. They talk about workplace safety and really common sense is such an important thing when it comes to workplace safety. People who have common sense are the ones that don't get into trouble, don't have problems as such. I don't know how you instruct people in common sense. I suppose that it's a matter of bringing out their confidence. It's all about teaching people to think things through before they do them.

iii) being safe:
I think that a lot of safety comes into common sense. If you don't have skill you don't have the knowledge to do a job that is in front of you. If you are not familiar with your job you may not know the safe way to do it.

iv) avoiding making mistakes:
Common sense saves you a fortune. If you employ blokes with common sense they avoid crashes with motor bikes and your plant, trucks and things before it happens and that saves you time and money.

v) being able to do practical things easily and keeping things simple:
Digging a post hole with a shovel, common sense indicates the easiest way to do it to get the shovel, get it full of earth and bring it out. People who don't have common sense attack it the only way, bringing a little dirt out on the shovel. It's much the same if you're trying to fell a tree, you look around to make sure that it's not going to fall on you. Common sense is requiring us to look at things, keep it simple and to make sure that you are not going to get injured and nobody else is going to get injured.

vi) knowing how the job will turn out:
You're presuming that they have got a feeling about how the job is expected to turn out because you've got a feeling in your head that it's going to operate just like you think it is. But, it's just naturally that's the way it's going to work. And you think that someone else can perhaps think along the same lines.

vii) being practical, pragmatic and fair:
I believe that common sense is about being practical, pragmatic and fair, I think. Put your emotions aside and look at what the whole decision making process is, I think you are able then to use sense that everybody ought to be able to make sense of any situation. And in so doing it becomes a common sense.

viii) making sensible decisions:
I suppose finding out the situation, weighing up the facts, looking at the alternate that's in the remedies and trying not to go to the extreme but to make a sensible decision.
d) **Common sense as learning**
The act of learning was seen to be a valuable way in which people developed common sense in workplace learning. It is related to experience here, but with a focus on different ways in which common sense is developed through the process of learning. This process may relate to self-learning or it may relate to observing other workers attempting to learn. Two forms of learning were emphasised by people in this study. The first type of learning was from making mistakes and learning or developing common sense as a result of the act of learning. One person stated:

> Common sense in workplace learning is in my opinion basically learning from one's mistakes. Everyone is entitled to make mistakes but if you don’t learn from them you then, in my opinion, are a fool and you’re not getting the essence of common sense. But, without making mistakes you will never get common sense.

The second type of learning is based on learning how to lead people. Here, the intent is to demonstrate that knowing how fast or slow to lead a group of people in a workplace is something that doesn't just occur. Some people have the capacity to make this judgement easily. They are the ones who exercise common sense in their leadership. As one person stated:

> Common sense in workplace learning is learning how to lead people. You may at times want to push them a bit faster or want them to become more motivated, but you are certainly not going to get them more motivated unless you use common sense by leading them rather than pushing them.

e) **Common sense as using others**
A further variation in people's experience of common sense in workplace learning was located in the people who felt that common sense can be demonstrated by using fellow workers in some way. This smart kind of behaviour was evidenced in two types of behaviour - observing others actions and by asking other workers.

The concept of observation to develop common sense should be a focus for people from childhood. It is something that farmers use frequently to improve their practice and decision making. It can be the observation of other farmers or it can be self-reflection of one's own practices and how they have worked or not. As the following person noted:

> You have got to observe how other people have made decisions or observe how you have made your own decisions in the past and what has not worked. It's a common thing amongst farmers to be observers. I'm learning to observe and that is a big part of your decision making.

The idea of developing common sense from asking others is grounded in the need for rural workers to receive assistance by asking their neighbours for advice based on his or her experiences. This was often the quickest way in which to make sensible decisions about a problem on the person's property. The following example about sick cattle indicates exactly what these people mean:

> That's common sense to phone up neighbours and to ask them. To my mind it was common sense to ring a neighbour of mine and I said that 20 sheep have died in twelve hours of being in this paddock. What would have killed them? Do you have any ideas? He asked if there were any yellow vine in the paddock. I said that there was. He said that is what would have got them. They cannot handle yellow vine when they are empty. I said that I had better move them to another paddock. He said not to worry any more because after twelve hours you will not lose any more.
f) Common sense as demonstrable abilities
For a considerable number of people common sense emerged as a set of demonstrable abilities that were evident in the workplace behaviours of particular people. These abilities are particularly cognitive by nature and they illustrate common sense in action. Examples of the abilities mentioned here are presented in the following section:

i) Solving problems:
In workplaces common sense was seen as the smartest way to solve a problem. Such an approach not only saves time and all of the workers are happy. The example of what to do when a gate comes open in the sheep yards illustrates this point:

*Common sense is taking the decision which is going to lead to the shortest distance in solving the problem. It is a matter of going straight to the point instead of beating around the bush in terms of problem solving. For example, if you are working in the sheep yards and there's a gate which has come open and the sheep get boxed up, I consider that the guy who goes straight to the gate and shuts it rather than calling out and attracting my attention is exercising common sense. A lot of people don't have it. A lot of people would say: "Hey, Chris, the bloody gate is open." It is too late then because half of the mob are gone!*

ii) Making decisions based on experience:
Making decisions based on experience involves a careful process of reflection and then action. The process of reflection may involve drawing upon one's own experiences or those of other workers. It is the importance of the experience that becomes inherent in the practice of common sense in workplaces. The following statement makes this point:

*I think that you go through a thought process of common sense ... what has happened in the past, when you have done that thing before, made that type of decision before and it hasn't worked, or has worked, that must come into ... you know, that's a very important part of it.*

iii) Working smarter:
Common sense is a key element in working smarter. It involves choosing the safest and most appropriate way to do something. For example in attaching an implement on to a tractor the use of common sense is essential:

*Be able to work smarter, harder and common sense plays a part in that. If you are going to attach an implement onto a tractor or if you are going to weld a piece of steel on, well common sense says that there a number of ways of doing it, safe ways and there are not so safe ways to do it. You know, there are safe ways to pick up an implement with a tractor or back a tractor in to hook it up.*

iv) Being able to focus:
The ability to focus in workplace learning is closely related to common sense according to some workers because it allows some people to switch their brain onto the task quickly. This is seen as using common sense. As the following person states:

*One of the problems is getting people that you train to lock into using common sense. They're not bad people and they've got a brain but they are not just locking in and focusing on this. They are sometimes just not grasping the common sense angle before they make decisions.*
Thinking laterally:
Common sense and thinking in workplace learning includes the need to think laterally to address some challenges in rural activities, such as working with irrigation on farm properties:

One of the great things in the bush is to get people to think laterally and it doesn't matter how simple the task is. I have said to blokes working for me that irrigation is as hard or simple as you want to make it. You can go out there all night changing cycles or you can changes cycles at 8 o'clock at night, check them at 10 and change them again at seven in the morning. But you're going to have to think about the paddock. You're going to have to think about what you are trying to achieve. Use some common sense if you've got too much water, put a few cycles on so you drop the level. So you slow it down so you don't have to be there until 7 in the morning rather than being up at 3 a.m.

Making things simple:
By making things simple, workers really mean that a person can access different methods for doing a job easily and with a minimum of fuss, especially if the key person is away and the substitute person knows quickly how to do the job well. As the person says:

Common sense is to make things simple. To have methods that are well documented and that are easy to access so everybody can grab them really quickly if need be. Common sense is, they should know how to access methods that if I'm away they can go to a method and grab it and they can learn without somebody being there so they are not stuck if the person's away.

Trusting one's judgement:
It is claimed that workers should base their judgements in making decisions on what they have learned about their jobs. As one person stated:

When I say use your common sense I am saying to trust your own judgement. If you use your common sense to a person I think I would say that you should use what you have learned.

Considering the whole picture:
The idea of thinking about the whole picture is important for it means that a person acts by considering all of the workers around him or her. Such a consideration infers that the worker will think about the effects on an action on those around him or her as a part of the problem-solving action. As this person states:

You've got to take into account the whole picture. It's got to be done almost instantaneously as the problem arises. You think that will remedy it and what its effects are. You need to be able to decide collectively how you will react. You'll decide on a remedy to do something that you have to do.

Looking around and realising the correct path:
The use of instinct was seen here to be important for making prompt, correct decisions. In a flash it should be possible to weigh up the pluses and the minuses of a situation and to come to a decision which is usually correct. As one person said:

It's partly instinct, but it is this absolute natural ability to look around and say this is just ridiculous what we are doing now. Common sense is the ability to look around, see the wide picture, and realise what's gone right and what's gone wrong. Realise when you're on the wrong path and you're making the wrong decision.
ix) Using one’s initiative:
The ability to use one’s initiative in dealing with different workplace situations is valued when thinking about common sense. Some workers have the gift of being able to practice using their initiative in different workplace settings. As one worker said:

*It's using your initiative to take on board very practical things that I have trouble with. Common sense is a gift that some people have and some don't. Quite often you will see blokes working and you will say to yourself, why did he do that?*

g) Common sense through personal attributes
Common sense was also seen to be exemplified through a number of personal attributes that workers exhibit in their behaviours. Such attributes reside within each worker and the extent to which they are exhibited gives an indication of the extent to which common sense is being used in the workplace. The nature of these personal attributes is highlighted in the following segments.

i) Being a self-motivated person:
Being self-motivated and practical seems to go hand in hand as indicators of common sense. Although the following person did not explain how being self-motivated did indicate more capacity for using common sense, he was adamant that such self-motivated people achieved their personal goals more effectively than did theoretically minded people. The following comment is typical of the responses in this regard:

*I think that most people who are the self-motivated type of people or are practical people, to me show more strengths in common sense that the people that aren’t motivated to those sorts of ways. And doing individual personal goals in a practical way rather than in a theory way. Practical people might use more common sense than the theoretical people.*

ii) Having confidence:
Common sense is exhibited confidently in people when they know all about the issue in the workplace. Together with experience, this know-it-all approach does produces the confidence that is required in strong common sense behaviour in workplaces. This is echoed in the following comments:

*I suppose it's all involved with experience and if you do something for long enough you develop the know-all, the know-how and the experience gives you the confidence. I am not sure if confidence equals common sense.*

iii) Being practical:
Having the capacity to be practical in one’s workplace behaviours and actions stands workers in very good stead as regards common sense. The aspect of the practical person that seems to be important here is that of being a down-to-earth person in workplaces who can obtain strong feedback from colleagues in workplace activities. As the following person noted:

*I've always been fairly practical and to an extent it's weighing up what will work, what won't, going far enough to challenge people but so you don't shock them, so you do get real feedback. A whole lot of things like that and I think that's common sense, practical ... I've always been a down-to-earth type of person.*
iv) Being streetwise:
An alternative version of being practical is to be streetwise in terms of workplace learning. The art of being streetwise is derived from one's workplace experiences whether it is with one's current employer or one's past employer. According to one person's comment:
*I think common sense or being streetwise comes about by probably by what we are talking about now. By learning and they're learning from past experiences, from some other employer or from their present employer.*

v) Having a broad vision:
The value of holding a broad vision of workplace learning is important for it allows each worker to obtain a fuller understanding of its occurrence. Gained through experience in workplace learning such a broad perspective offers a liberating aspect that allows workers to improve one's common sense:
*Common sense is the broadness of vision which I keep coming back to. It's the ability to look wider, to stand back and say hey what are you doing? Whereas experience might give you that so I suppose you improve your common sense with experience but people can have a lot of experience and still not know too, have common sense.*

vi) Having control over one's emotional input:
The importance of having control over one's emotions is seen as being important for common sense in workplaces. In the fragment of this aspect the issue of control refers to controlling each worker's emotional input. How this is achieved is not explained. As the person stated:
*In workplace learning I think common sense is trying to control other people's emotional input*

Discussion
The results of this study indicate that just as the literature is diverse in its attempts to understand the concept of common sense, so are people in workplaces. The main benefit from the study is to demonstrate that people in workplace contexts do believe that common sense is important to them and that they experience it in at least seven different ways at work. No attempt is made to prioritise these different conceptions of common sense. However, they do reveal that common sense in workplace learning is something much more than an intuition or gut feeling or an innate ability. It is an experience that may relate to how people learn in their work, the abilities that they use in exercising common sense, and the personal attributes that are exhibited by people who demonstrate such sense. In this way common sense is described as a vital element in workplace learning.

In particular, the view that was expressed by Lonergan that common sense is the epitome of practical knowledge in workplaces seems to hold true. While workers may engage in the transfer of learning in their work they certainly are more concerned with doing the work task well and safely. They may use certain short cuts to solve problems in the workplace and they may rely on other workers for assistance in doing so, but are all of the time using this distinctive type of knowledge to make their work practices smarter and more effective. As such, common sense in workplace learning is something that contributes to workers being smart operators and successful ones as well.
If these results do anything they suggest that common sense in workplace learning should be taken very seriously by all members of a work group. The designated leader may not be the person who can exercise most common sense in the completion of work tasks. However, one role for the leader is to acknowledge evidence of common sense in work practices and to promote it openly in the relevant work teams. The study reported here did focus on people in regional settings for their experiences of common sense in workplace learning. To assist in the generalisation process, it would be helpful to undertake replicatory studies in metropolitan workplaces, especially in manufacturing and service industries, and in professional situations. This would enable a much fuller understanding of how Australian workers experienced common sense in their work practices and may provide additional data on which to develop a more complete understanding of this very common, but less understood, concept of common sense.

References
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