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Learning to Speak

Learning by speaking about one's work within socially constructed mechanisms: the collective reconstruction of the results of work analysis (in the case of in-home care in Quebec)

This paper, which goes hand in hand with Abada Mhamdi's, seeks to show how socially constructed mechanisms (either the practice of management or the methodology of research), based on exchanges (between peers and/or between researcher and operator) about work, from the perspective of a distancing from the work itself (either a filmed work situation or the formalized reconstruction of the results of work analysis) give rise to reflexive collective activities which allow for the development of acquired knowledge and the construction of new knowledge and rules for action.

As for ergonomics, operators' speech about their work has different states but each are more or less linked to the construction of knowledge. Interviews are, traditionally, one of the three pillars of research methodology, along with observations which are equipped with the activity and the dimensions of the environment's parameters.

Speech about work thus occupies an important place with the different functions in the different stages of procedure which can be considered as a socially constructed mechanism within which all the agents in the situation are absorbed by their own point of view. Speech about work has also been, for some time, an object of research dealing with "training for action" of the agents of work (another socially constructed mechanism), centered around the process of appropriation of the concepts and methods of work analysis as a tool for the transformation of the representations of work and practices of action on work.

Over all, two phenomena can be observed: speech about work is not a "given" which it would suffice to gather, but a "construct" in the interaction, either with the researcher or between peers or between different agents: one learns to speak about work by speaking under certain conditions since the expression of that which one knows, without knowing one knows it, is not obvious. Moreover, one learns something about work (his own and that of others) by speaking about it since a dynamics is created between expression, realization, reflexive activity and confrontation which produces on an individual and collective level a discovery of the new elements which lead to changes in representations of the situation, work practices, the development of new knowledge about work, its conditions and its consequences.

In any case, it seems that the "distancing" from work, by whatever mechanism, plays a determining role in the activation of this reflexive collective activity which produces knowledge from exchanges about that which becomes "a possible common object" of thought, since it is externalized and de-individualized, and since each protagonist has, moreover, his own objectives.

The analysis of this process of individual and collective construction of knowledge about work and mutual learning comes from the first phase of collective reconstruction of the results of a study dealing with work/health relations of in-home care personnel in Quebec. In this case, the presentation by researchers of partially formalized results (obtained by observation and by collective and individual interviews with the participants) allows for the distancing.