

Chapter 92

An Honor to Train: The Professional Identity of Army Trainers

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ABSTRACT

One's identity is often closely tied to one's profession. It is one of the first questions typically asked when meeting someone new. It is often how we introduce ourselves and often included in introductory-type information when asked. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the professional identity of civilian (non-enlisted) U.S. Army trainers. Professional identity is a dynamic concept; developed and refined by a professional's interaction with the environment and with reflection and examination of that interaction. To examine the concept, participants in this study were asked to describe what it meant to them to be trainers for the Army. Results indicate that Army trainers have a strong connection to the Army and are a deep commitment to their students; many of whom are soldiers. Training soldiers for potentially dangerous missions motivates these trainers to provide quality instruction to their learners. Based on study findings, conclusions were drawn, and implications for researchers and practitioners in the field of human resource development (HRD) were presented.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Professionally, who and what am I?” (Curle, 1969, p. 9). This is a question that many professionals have asked themselves at one point or another in their careers. One's identity is often closely tied to one's profession. It is one of the first questions typically asked when meeting someone new. It is often how we introduce ourselves and often included in introductory-type information when asked. “My name is (name here) and I'm a/an

(occupation here)”. Yet, the concept of identity is much more complex than the simple stating of one's profession might imply. Identity is a multi-faceted concept that is both fluid and contextual (Pointner, 2009). However, despite the importance of professional identity, and the significance it plays in life, a paradox is this: “Modern scholarship pays surprisingly little attention to the significance of the identity group (called) “occupation” for the identity forming process, although a person's profession plays a very important role in his or

her self-fashioning. When we meet new people we often judge them according to the jobs they have as much as we are judged by them in terms of what we do” (Pointner, 2009, p. 12).

While it may be easy to judge people very quickly, based on the jobs they have (Pointner, 2009), the concept of professional identity in itself, is more complex. Professional identity is comprised of many different characteristics and may include several sub-identities (Vloet, 2010). Issues of professional identity become even more complex when the context in which one operates as a professional is considered. In this study, the context is the United States Army, and the profession is that of educator or trainer.

The following quote is found in the opening paragraphs of The U. S. Army Learning Concept 2015 (ALC 2015), a document which outlines the Army’s strategy and vision for learning over the next several years: “We live in a much more competitive security environment. This means that we have to learn faster and better than our future adversaries. Stated a bit differently, we must prevail in the competitive learning environment” (ALC 2015, 2011, p. i). Key in meeting the long and short-term goals noted in the ALC 2015 are experienced faculty and instructors with the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to teach the myriad of subjects necessary for today’s Army to function. Also important is the development of instructional designers, educational support, and educational program managers; all of whom ensure the Army’s training function runs smoothly.

Considering the size of the Army adds another dimension to this equation. As of August, 2011, there were 467,110 active duty enlisted personnel in the Army, and all receive ongoing training throughout their careers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). When compared to Fortune 500 companies, it would rank number two in terms of size (number of employees) (Fortune, 2011). Adding to that number are civilian employees, contractors, and a host of other entities that participate in Army training. The Army’s training

function is enormous, simply given its size. This is the environment and the context in which Army trainers must perform. However, there is a paucity of existing research on those trainers, and therein lies the problem. In order to provide continuing professional development for existing trainers, and to recruit and prepare new trainers, more must be known about the Army training profession and those who are in this profession. An understanding of the trainers, themselves; what motivates them, how they see their positions, and how they came to be Army trainers, is necessary in order to provide professional development that meets their needs. In order for the Army’s training-related strategy to move forward, given all the aforementioned variables, more must be known about those trainers who are critical to its success.

2. PURPOSE OF STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The role of trainer for the U.S. Army is more important and more complex now than ever before. But what does it mean to be a trainer for the U.S. Army? The purpose of this study is to examine the professional identity of U.S. Army trainers. In describing the professional identity of teachers, Vloet (2010) notes “A professional identity is not a fixed characteristic and is never complete; it is a dynamic process instead. It is about continuously (re)interpreting meaningful experiences from the teacher taken from his or her practice and biography” (p. 84). Sub questions (documented below, as if they were posed to trainers) were designed to have respondents consider their practices and biographies as Army trainers. This consideration is important, as researchers describes the process of developing professional identity as one of ongoing growth, characterized by learning from experience and reflection and dialogue with colleagues on that experience (Vloet, 2010; Cross, 2009; Brooke, 1994). Indeed, the role of self is important in the process of professional identity

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