Chapter Review: “Employer-Sponsored Learning in the Workplace”

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Abstract:

Throughout EDAE 520 we have examined the different applications of the multi-faceted discipline, Adult Education through our class discussions and readings in our text, *Handbook of Adult Education* (Kasworm, Rose, and Ross-Gordon, 2010)*.* This paper will review Chapter 22, “Employer-Sponsored Learning in the Workplace” (Shari Peterson, 2010), examining some progressive trends in workplace education.

Then this paper will review an assessment of the dynamics, challenges, and possible solutions associated with the broadening of workplace learning from a Canadian perspective in “Employer Investment in Workplace Learning: Report on the Edmonton Roundtable” (Ron Saunders, 2009).

Chapter Review: “Employer-Sponsored Learning in the Workplace”

Dating back to apprenticeships for craftsmen in the Middle Ages and beyond, employer sponsored learning has been and is one of the oldest and most widespread applications of Adult Education. Historically, such learning was conducted exclusively to further the performance and success of the organization, but some employers are adopting new philosophies and practices.

Through an examination of current literature on the subject, we gain an understanding of these developments and some of the challenges associated with implementing them. In Chapter 22 of our text, Shari Peterson (2010) examines the changing face of employer-sponsored learning. In a relevant report on the topic, Ron Saunders (2009) provides additional insights that explain why some organizations are reluctant to embrace these ideas and possible solutions.

**Review of Chapter 22, “Adult-Sponsored Learning in the Workplace” (Peterson, 2010)**

As Peterson alludes, for many organizations employer-sponsored learning is anything but business as usual. Citing previous work by Bierema (1996), Dirkx (1996), and Peterson & Provo (2000), Peterson (2010) points out, “As a more humanistic focus on learning continued to surface, the perspective began shifting toward an understanding that professional development for performance and personal development for individual gain need not be mutually exclusive objectives.” These organizations seek to better themselves by bettering their employees in a broader sense than they have previously. According to Peterson, two complimenting theories provide the foundation for this new thinking, general systems theory and human capital theory.

General systems theory provides a holistic framework for understanding. It models organizations as functioning systems made up of collective, contributing individuals. Both the contributions to and the resulting benefits for the whole system collectively are greater than the sum of employee’s contributions and benefits taken individually (Peterson 2010). The system as a whole reaps greater reward by helping the individuals comprising that system better themselves and the system simultaneously.

Human capital theory provides an economic framework for understanding. It identifies self-interest as the source of motivation for both employers and employees. Organizations invest in workplace learning to increase profitability. Workers invest time in workplace activities to further increase their personal development and earning potential. According to Peterson (2010):

Organizations used to engage almost exclusively in organization-specific knowledge and skill development; some still do. Contemporary organizations, however, invest to a great extent in developing a broader knowledge, skill, and attitude base, even with the understanding that they may be developing their employees to be more marketable elsewhere.”

For progressive workplace organizations, these theories and practices foster a learning culture. Within such cultures, organizations systematically provide often overlapping employee learning opportunities utilizing a variety of practices including Apprenticeships, On-the-Job Training (OJT), Quality Circles (QC), Career Development, Leadership Development, and Mentoring and Coaching Practices. In Chapter 22, Peterson discusses each of these practices, the benefits, and potential issues with each.

Apprenticeships and OJT enable organizations to transition new and/or inexperienced workers into their jobs systematically under the tutelage and scrutiny of coworkers or supervisors who in turn provide feedback. The workers learn by doing under the guidance of those who already know. When conducted properly, these practices not only facilitate and promote the organizational learning culture and the duel organizational/individual benefit, they also can promote diversity. However, as Peterson points out, these practices can also have the opposite effect if the feedback or the selection process for participation is tainted. Those who are empowered in the selection, training, or guidance of the new workers can potentially abuse their authority and exclude individuals from participating or corrupt their development with misinformation and/or personal bias, thus undermining the process and the learning culture.

Quality Circles are also feedback based initiatives that potentially benefit both the organization and individual. These are typically formalized focus groups where the employees provide recommendations for improvement to the organizational leadership based on their firsthand observations. Peterson (2010) quotes Dahlgaard and Dhalgaard-Park (2006):

(The)…success of QC learning opportunities, both for individuals and the organization, likely depends on an organizational culture in which (a) management accepts that employees closest to the processes may have better ideas on how to improve them, (b) workers are rewarded (e.g., profit sharing, bonuses, recognition) when their ideas prove beneficial to the organization (e.g., cost savings, fewer defects, waste reduction, patentable designs), and (c) specifications are in place that lead to the above.

This practice can only be effective if each of these criteria is met. Peterson points out additional potential drawbacks with QC, mirroring those mentioned previously including abuse of power, favoritism, and exclusionary practices on the part of decision makers in the process.

Career Development, Leadership Development, Mentoring and Coaching can all be formal or informal and include a variety of activities intended to enhance learning, the development of the individual, and the success of the organization. Again, the biggest drawbacks with each are potential abuse of power and exclusionary practices.

While Peterson provides an informative synopsis on the current state of employer-sponsored learning in progressive, proactive organizations that provide systems to empower employees and foster their development through promotion and practice of mutually beneficial learning cultures, her analysis fails to adequately address some related pragmatic issues.

How can less progressive organizations that do not promote or participate in workplace learning programs be swayed to adopt these practices? Should government provide incentives to employers who sponsor broad based learning in the workplace? What affect does the economic cycle have on employer-sponsored learning?

**Review of “Employer Investment in Workplace Learning:**

**A Report on the Edmonton Roundtable” (Saunders 2009)**

From 2007 to 2009, Ron Saunders of Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) addressed employer-sponsored learning in a series of reports prepared for the Canadian Council on Learning’s Work and Learning Knowledge Centre. These reports addressed relevant research on employer-sponsored learning and spotlighted the findings of a series of roundtables jointly sponsored by CPRN and the Canadian Council on Learning’s Work and Learning Knowledge Centre addressing the subject. These discussion groups included senior government officials and senior representatives from business, labor, colleges and universities, Aboriginal organizations and non-governmental organizations. His report on the Edmonton meeting complements Peterson’s article and addresses real world challenges to the advancement of employer-sponsored learning that are applicable not only in Canada, but the U.S. as well.

Citing research by Goldenberg (2006), Saunders (2009) points out that less than 30% of adult workers in Canada participate in job-related education and training compared to 45% in the United States. He also cites Bailey (2007): “Evidence is emerging that employers who do invest heavily in learning programs for their employees usually experience a high rate of return on investment.” This leads us to question why more employers in the U.S. and Canada do not participate in these programs.

There are barriers to doing more:

* Employers (especially small- to medium-sized) are concerned about ‘poaching,’ time off the job, and whether the returns to training justify the costs
* Sometimes they lack information about how to find/organize training programs that would meet their needs.
* Workers question the commitment of government and employers to substantive initiatives in workplace training. (Saunders 2009)

For potential stakeholders in employer-sponsored learning, these objections are very real.

Other barriers are related to the economic cycle. “Typically, in boom periods, both employers

and workers have difficulty finding the time for training, while in downturns it is difficult to find

the funds.” (Saunders 2009). In addition, “The decision by employers to invest in training is all about the bottom line. They must have reason to believe the investment will be profitable.” (Saunders, 2009). Quantifying the benefits of workplace learning is problematic.

Saunders report goes on to offer a variety of viable solutions to the pragmatic issues presently impeding the expansion of employer-sponsored learning. These suggestions include the forming of partnerships amongst employers, workers, unions, governments and educators; active learning culture advocacy by business organizations; awareness campaigns addressing the benefits; and governmental incentives to organizations and individuals in the form of tax credits, matching training funds, and vouchers, to name a few (Saunders, 2009).

**Conclusion**

Both Peterson and Saunders strongly advocate the further proliferation of adult learning in the workplace and their perspectives enrich our understanding of this timely topic Although many, principally larger organizations already embrace the benefits of the workplace learning culture, these companies are in the minority. For the rest, the status quo is in need of change.

As the business world evolves, organizations and individuals must adapt or suffer the consequences. The emergence of the global economy and technology revolution affect employer and employee alike, and the need for employer-sponsored learning has never been greater. The time is now for forward thinking so that more organizations can realize the empowering philosophical vision of employer-sponsored learning offered by Peterson by overcoming the practical challenges highlighted by Saunders.

**References**

Peterson, Shari (2010). Employer Sponsored Learning in the Workplace. In C.E. Kasworm, A. D. Rose, & J.M. Ross-Gordon (Eds.), Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education (pp. 243-252). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Saunders, Ron (2009), Employer Investment in Workplace Learning: Report on the Edmonton Roundtable. Work and Learning Knowledge Centre and Canadian Policy Research Networks: Ottawa, Canada. 17 pages.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Most of us have participated in some kind of employer sponsored learning in the form of training programs, internships, or classes. Based on your personal experience, both as a learner and as an educator (if applicable), what have been your good and bad experiences, and what made those experiences good or bad? What does it take for workplace learning to be effective?

2. If given the task of creating a workplace culture in an organization where one did not currently exist, as an educator/training manager how would you go about doing it? Is it possible to quantify the benefits of workplace learning?