

The Power of Workplace Learning

**1st Symposium of the Educational Research Unit on Adult and Workplace Learning,
co-sponsored with the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre,
Canadian Council for Learning,**

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Introduction

One of the objectives of the Educational Research Unit (ERU) in Adult and Workplace Learning, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa is to develop partnerships with various community groups and associations. Such links provide the opportunity to identify research needs and potential capacity for research projects that are driven from a community based approach. As a step in this direction, the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre, Canadian Council for Learning agreed to co-sponsor and participate in a joint event with the ERU that would bring together four types of constituents- academics, graduate students, and representatives from the business and labour sectors.

The underlying premise behind this event was that a dialogue among these stakeholders would help create awareness of the issues facing each group. A planning committee was struck and a theme for the event identified – *The Power of Workplace Learning: What the Evidence has to Say*. It was also decided that a key feature of the symposium would allow for ample time for interaction among the participants. In this brief synopsis, a description of the symposium which took place at the Faculty of Education on June 27, 2008 is provided. Twenty six delegates participated in the day event. The overall format for the dialogue included a presentation on improving workplace learning by Professor Karen Evans from the Institute of Education in the United Kingdom; a second presentation on workplace e-learning by Professor Louise Marchand, from the University of Sherbrooke which was followed by a question and answer period. Break out groups were formed with focussed discussion questions and a plenary session brought delegates together again where the main issues of the dialogue were consolidated by a panel of resource people. Important networking also took place at the health break and throughout lunch which was provided on site.

Improving Work Place Learning

In her presentation, Professor Evans described the results of five linked research projects that explored workplace learning in the United Kingdom. In these studies, workplace learning was defined as learning that derives its purposes from the context of employment, including socialization, and enculturation, competence, performance and standards, innovation and renewal, as well as equity and social justice. Social-cultural learning, particularly situated learning, and perspectives of the workplace that focus on

the broader issues concerning the employment relationship are considered in the conceptual and theoretical frameworks.

In these studies, three dimensions of workplace learning were consistently identified as significant. The regulation of the employment relationship and government initiatives had a significant impact on opportunities for, and the nature of, workplace learning. Secondly, workplaces were characterized as more expansive or restrictive as learning environments. Lastly, dispositions and tacit skills of workers/employees influenced the nature of the working environment and the ways in which workers react to and interact with that environment. Thus, three overlapping 'scales' of activity were kept in view....individual actors, the immediate working environment and the wider structural features.

Five stages to improving workplace learning involved (a) identifying the dimensions of the workplace that impacted on learning, (b) assessing the workplace as a learning environment, (c) identifying potential for improvements, (d) identifying a balance of advantages in introducing particular changes and (e) implementing and monitoring. Improving workplace learning entail constructing more expansive learning environments based on what workers want and need. This may involve changes to working practices and conditions. Also, it is important to pay attention to power differentials and workplace inequalities as well as individual wants and needs.

E-Learning as a Significant Form of Work-related Learning

Professor Marchand had several key messages to her presentation. Citing the literature, 95% of small and medium enterprises are using the internet in their organizations for sharing general information and for information on their products and services while over 29% of these organizations believe that e-learning is worthwhile. Based on a review of studies from the Canadian Society for Training and Development, the use of e-learning is progressing and learners are more satisfied when they have an internal locus of control. As well, synchronous learning is judged to be more efficient yet more research funds are needed to investigate best practices at the workplace. A central argument in the literature also signals the importance of lifelong learning in society and e-learning can be seen as part of the solution in creating an informed citizenry.

Referring to a study conducted by Marchand, Loisier and Lauzon, which looked at 10 enterprises using e-learning, the researchers found that employees had more access to learning especially those who were in rural regions of the province and for those learners who were handicapped. Results also indicated that organizations were now coming together to share resources and support especially in the case of small enterprises where it is difficult to bring in expensive training opportunities for one or two employees. It was found that learning objects that were created for e-learning delivery in one company were now being shared across companies. This type of best practice needs to be encouraged. In addition, employees reported that social aspect of the learning had improved where networks of learners on- line were being developed and supported.

A number of pedagogical factors related to e-learning at the workplace were also discussed. Learners need to be autonomous and ready to change their viewpoint on what

counts as learning. Often employees who have tried e-learning have reported that they feel isolated with no access to a group and little feedback on their progress. For learners new to this type of delivery it is important to begin slowly and build up to a 60 minute period of time on line. As well, there is a growing need to train instructors on virtual learning especially on how to develop collaborative learning among on-line employees. In our knowledge based economy today, being cyber literate seems to be another type of essential skill required of all workers.

Deliberations in the Break-out Groups

After the keynote presentations, discussion among the participants in the break out groups focussed on four main topics. The symposium participants suggested that a national policy framework be developed for workplace learning or training. Innovative 'big picture' models could be developed that focus on other purposes for workplace learning than just building skills. In developing such a framework, it was suggested that we could look to other jurisdictions to learn from others. Programs that were working well in other areas included workplace learning through peer training and joint committees involving employers and workers in developing training programs. The policy in Quebec of obligating businesses to spend a certain proportion of their payroll could be encouraged in other provinces to support the development of a system of workplace learning.

Another consistent theme was the issue of collaboration in the planning and delivery of workplace learning: how to foster partnerships; how to maintain them; and innovative examples of partnership models that work well. Throughout the discussion, participants provided several practical examples of learning models, initiatives, and resources. An interesting discussion point, which may contribute to future research considerations, was the idea of learning as "risky business". Workplace learning initiatives could be perceived as risky by both managers and employees. Although there was some discussion about the need to lessen the perceived risk associated with learning, many questions remain about why, when, and how learning involves risk-taking.

Recognizing prior learning of employees emerged as a major issue during the group discussions. It was suggested that organizations need to be more proactive in determining the skills and knowledge that an employee brings to their workplace. Although the recognition of prior learning requires more attention in the workplace, it is important to consider the potential power relationships between employers and employees. A report by the Prior learning Assessment Centre in Halifax to the Canadian Council on Learning in June 2008 would be a good resource for further discussion in another such forum.

E-learning will become an important method of teaching and learning in the workplace in the future. Participants wondered how e-learning could be encouraged as a tool for training and the implications of using technology in workplace learning. It was suggested that e-learning may not be convenient for all types of people or the ways that all people learn but that efforts could be made to include all employees in e-learning activities.

Also, discussion focussed on how e-learning products are selected and how learning using these tools can be evaluated.

Looking Forward: Directions for Continuing the Dialogue

During the plenary session, the delegates came together to summarize the main points brought forward during the break out groups. Then, a panel of resource people consolidated the issues that emerged through the group discussions. The recognition of prior learning and what counts as informal learning was identified as important issues that threaded through the discussion groups. Encouraging the use of on-line learning that involves all employees, and evaluating its effectiveness were identified as important issues around e-learning. In further discussions, we can explore existing practical models of e-learning and examine the types of workers, such as older workers or those in small businesses or workers with low skills who might benefit specifically from this mode of learning.

Finally, developing partnerships among industry, labour groups and university communities were identified as an important aspect of continuing a dialogue about workplace learning. Although members of these three groups have varying perspectives on what is important in workplace learning, a common link will be to share ideas, new projects and practices and to look for ways to collaborate in the future. It was suggested that there could be two mechanisms for doing this through the work of the ERU. The first is to invite local representatives from labour and business who are members of the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre to attend the three ERU afternoon seminars which will be planned in 2008-2009 here at the Faculty of Education. If there was an interest, one of these seminars could focus on any of the themes identified at this symposium with attention on a labour or business perspective. The second idea for continuing the dialogue stems from the opportunity that the Annual Congress for the Social Sciences and Humanities will be here in Ottawa at Carleton University in late May early June. With the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education participating in the Congress with their annual conference (May 24-27, 2009), the potential exists to plan a joint pre-conference session with representation from labour, business and universities on a cross cutting theme related to workplace learning. Follow-ups on these ideas will take place after the summer break.

The ERU Symposium Planning Committee