Practice-Based Learning: Balancing Individual and Organisational Needs

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Abstract

A strategic and balanced approach to practice based learning is required to fully realise its potential to enhance employability, develop the workforce and balance individual and organisational needs. An interpretive study utilising survey research was conducted to investigate how a large charitable organisation and its staff experienced practice based learning. Data was collected from paid staff and volunteers, from all levels of a state branch of this organisation, through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The findings presented in this paper are the initial results of a doctoral research study. Included is a rationale, a brief review of pertinent literature, and a discussion of the methodology. In conclusion suggestions are made on how best to balance the needs of individuals and the organisation through practice based learning.

Introduction

The concept of practice based learning is broad. The focus of this paper is on practice-based learning that is work related and includes the perspectives of the employer, representing organisational needs, and workers, representing the needs of individuals. In this context practice based learning refers to any learning, formal or informal, arising from the practice of being engaged with paid or unpaid work in a job, profession or voluntary capacity.

Rationale for Using Practice-Based Learning

Catering for the diversity that adults bring to the workplace through practice-based learning in the context of a busy work environment coupled with the need for continued productivity and profitability is difficult, but for many organisations their sustainability depends on their ability to successfully adapt to an increasingly dynamic environment. One of the key strategies used by organisations to secure competitive advantage is improving and developing workforce skills (Burns, 2002; Conlon, 2004). This is so important that when measured in 1997, Australian employers spent $7.4 billion per annum on structured training for their employees (Robbins, Millett, and Waters-Marsh, 2004). It is recognised that the level of learning in many organisations could be the only distinguishing factor between successful organisations (Massey and Walker, 1999 in Miller, 2003 p. 14). Organisational change is complex and difficult to sustain. The majority of change initiatives fail, largely due to a failure to sufficiently address people's emotional responses to the need for change and the implementation process (Fullan, 2006; Kerber and Buono, 2005; Loup and Koller, 2005; Roberto and Levesque, 2005; Senge, Jaworski, Kahane, and Scharmer, 2005).

Learning and Education Are Different

It must be recognised that learning and education are two distinct phenomena. Learning, often occurs as a result of education, but should not be confused with it. Education refers to the process, implemented by an educator or change agent, that is "designed to effect changes in the knowledge, skills and attitudes of individuals, groups or communities" and learning, which refers to the person who is changed, is defined as "the act or process by which behavioural change, knowledge, skills and attitudes are acquired" (Boyd, Apps et al., in Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson, 2005 p. 10).

Early Conceptions of Adult Learning

Much of the early research by psychologists on learning was conducted with either animals or children and did not adequately reflect they way adults learned. In the mid 20th Century, Dewey, Lewin and Knowles explored how adults learned. Dewey made strong connections between learning and experience and concluded that education must be related to the entirety of one's life and that continuity of experience and interaction with one's environment were essential elements of learning. (Burns, 2002; Conlon, 2004; Jarvis, 1987; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Both Dewey and Lewin valued a democratic integrated approach to adult learning. Lewin's investigation of the process of re-education led to the development of his three step model for planned change: unfreeze, move and refreeze. This meant that people changed when they saw the need for it, adjusted their attitudes, values and behaviours and embedded the changes in their everyday lives (Coghlan and Brannick, 2003; Coghlan and Claus, 2005; Lewin, 1943).

Knowles developed these ideas and formalised the concept of adult learning. Adults needed learning to be relevant to their everyday lives. Once they understood its relevance they could engage with it, but unlike children, they could not be persuaded to learn something just for the sake of it. Adults' self-concept required that they directed their own learning. They learned from their own and others experiences and brought a wealth of experience with them into the learning situation, which was important for human resource developers to recognise and use. Problem-based learning was most appropriate for adults as they had a life-centred approach to learning and were intrinsically motivated to learn in relation to real issues that they needed to solve as part of their everyday lives and to continue developing themselves as people (Burns, 2002; Fenwick and Tennant, 2004; Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson, 2005).

The main criticisms of Knowles concept of adult learning were that it did not fit all cases all the time and some of these concepts were equally applicable to children's learning. There were times when it was inappropriate for adults to be completely self-directing in their learning. Experiential learning may not be as appropriate when adults were tackling new areas, where they had little or no prior learning or their prior experience included a substantial amount of misinformation or unhelpful experiences. When developing adult education programs, there was a risk of forming stereotypical categories to cater for the expected life experiences of people, which disallowed transition from one category to another. Adults were also motivated to learn extrinsically in such situations where there was a need to perform. Children could also be self-directing, have and build a bank of experiences and be problem-solvers who were intrinsically motivated. Further to this Knowles was criticised for drawing from the two competing fields of humanism and behaviourism (Burns, 2002).

Recent Conceptions of Workplace Learning

The traditional training model identified needs then implemented, evaluated and reviewed a program. This approach tended to ignore changing organisational relationships, links with human resource development and benefits of adopting a proactive lifelong learning approach (Burns, 2002). A more situated perspective that strongly linked the learner with their environment, particularly within a community of practice was seen to be of benefit in workplace learning. Individuals learned as they participated with others from the same work department or project team and as they interacted with the history, culture and procedures of the community of practice. Knowledge developed and was linked to action as members of the community of practice used its tools and participated in its activities. The aim was for individuals to become fully participating members in the community of practice rather than merely learn about the practice. Learning was seen to be a social process, collectively constructed that resolved contradictions in a complex system. Preservation of effective practice was as important as innovation. Continued open dialogue and communication, with a range of different people from across the community of practice was central to learning. It was important that practice based learning was connected to structural and strategic changes that occurred within an organisation. If the practice-based learning was not connected in this way, it could have low status, be under resourced and achieve poor results. Universally applying mandatory training to all was equally inappropriate (Burns, 2002; Fenwick and Tennant, 2004; Gonczi, 2004).

The main criticism of this approach focused on the political, ethical and strategic effects of the characteristics of the practices of the community in which the practice-based learning occurred. Issues of access and equity, tradition, culture, and dysfunctionality were raised. How would the marginalised be included? How would the ingrained routines of tradition and culture be overcome to adopt a more effective approach? How could the cycle of dysfunctionality be broken and replaced with healthy effective policies, procedures and practices? Finding answers to these questions was important to maximising the benefits of practice-based learning (Fenwick and Tennant, 2004).

Organisational Change and Development

The rapid pace of change in the general environment frequently provided the impetus for planned organisational change in order "to solve problems, learn from experience, to adapt to external environmental changes, to improve performance and to influence future changes" (Waddell, Cummings, and Worley, 2004 p. 30). People found it difficult to change even when they knew they had to. For example, even though smoking, drinking, obesity, stress and lack of exercise, were known health risks, these behaviours consumed 80% of health care budgets and often resulted in coronary surgery, after which most people still did not change their lifestyle to improve their health (Deutschman, 2005, in Fullan, 2006 p. 36). Personal crisis did not provide sufficient motivation. In explanation of this phenomenon, John Kotter of Harvard Business School stated

that, "It is never about strategy or structure. It is always about changing the behaviour of people" and "behaviour change happens mostly by speaking to people's feelings. In highly successful change efforts, people find ways to help others see the problems or solutions in ways that influence emotions, not just thoughts" (Deutschman, 2005, in Fullan, 2006 p. 36). During the second half of the 20th Century a range of theories on planned change were developed to address this issue.

Lewin's Three Step Change Model

Lewin's work on re-education informed his understanding of how best to effect change. Unfreezing mindsets, or changing they way people think, was most effectively achieved by reducing the restraining forces rather than by increasing the driving forces for change. Lewin found that attending lectures and discussion groups motivated people to change, or move. Refreezing, or embedding the change in everyday practice was more likely to occur if an individual made a decision as a result of group discussion and felt a commitment to the group. Changes to procedures, culture, norms, policies or structures that supported the new behaviour also enhanced transfer of learning (Coghlan and Claus, 2005; Lewin, 1947; Schaffer, 1999; Waddell, Cummings, and Worley, 2004).

Action Research

Lewin conceptualised action research, based on democratic decision-making processes, group participation and commitment to improvement and the alleviation of social problems. Linking theory and practice empowered practitioners to research and solve their own problems. His original model consisted of a repetition of iterative cycles of analysis, data collection, conceptualisation, planning, acting then further collection of data or evaluation. Lewin believed that the research needed to alleviate social issues such as inter-group relations had to result in social action rather than for research purposes alone. In the one paper he wrote on action research, Lewin identified the problem of transfer of learning. He found that participants, who attended workshops, were motivated to act but did nothing. He concluded that a three pronged approach of action, research and training would promote sustainable change. Indeed, Lewin grappled with the same issues as organisational developers of today. Lewin died before completing a comprehensive treatise on action research, leaving the field wide open for others to adapt its nomenclature and characteristics (Dickens and Watkins, 1999; Lewin, 1946).

Modern Adaptations of Action Research

The first adaptation to action research saw a change in participant involvement. The change agent became a co-learner and facilitator rather than the key player. The second adaptation to action research was the inclusion of a positive approach to planned change, known as appreciative inquiry, which focused organisations' attention on working from their strengths and involved diagnosis, intervention, evaluation and transfer and was based on the assumptions that organisations would respond to the positive, visualisation of a positive future would create the drive necessary to achieve it and there was power in these affirmations. Synthesis of the concepts evident in Lewin's model and the various approaches to action learning provided the basis for a framework that described the four basic activities of entering and contracting, diagnosing, planning and implementing change, and evaluating and institutionalising change that are associated with the field of organisational development (Cady and Caster, 2000; Johnson and Leavitt, 2001; Waddell, Cummings, and Worley, 2004).

The Role of the Change Agent

The change agent was the person who stimulated and managed change and could be a manager within the organisation, a change specialist from another department within the organisation or an outside consultant. Their role included establishing relationships and scoping the work through the entering and contracting process, diagnosing organisations, groups and jobs, collecting and analysing diagnostic information, feeding back the diagnostic information, designing interventions, monitoring and managing the change and evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention. While there was consensus across the literature about the general nature of this role, experts described its components differently (Block, 2000; Margerison, 1995; Smith, 2000; Waddell, Cummings, and Worley, 2004). For example, Margerison, 1995, characterised it as 12 steps that occurred in the three stages of appraisal, assessment and application. The four appraisal steps included contact, preparation, contracting and contract negotiation. The four assessment steps included data collection, data analysis and diagnosis, data feedback and data discussion. The four application steps included proposals, executive decisions, implementation of the decision and review (Margerison, 1995). Change agents

approached the role using a variety of consulting styles that were shaped by their own personalities, skills and techniques and the context in which they worked.

Designing and Evaluating Interventions

An intervention was a sequence of planned actions designed to improve organisational performance. The effectiveness of interventions was judged by the degree, to which they met organisational needs, were based on a sound understanding of the intended outcomes and the extent to which participants were able to competently adapt to the planned change. Interpersonal, technostructural, strategic and human resource management interventions were used for different purposes (Waddell, Cummings, and Worley, 2004).

Methodology

This paper investigated how workforce development could be enhanced through practice-based learning so that individual and organisational needs were satisfied. It focused on asking; what evidence was there of practice-based learning; how accessible it was to staff; and what factors appeared to influence its effectiveness in regard to enhancing workforce development. A mixed method research approach was taken. This survey research included the use of semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire as it was deemed the most appropriate method of collecting data about subjects' experiences of professional development and organisational change (Cohen and Manion, 1989). Prior to conducting the research, the instruments were trialled and adjusted based on feedback from trial participants.

There were two forms of semi-structured interviews. The first was an exploratory interview with one key informant, chosen for their strategic knowledge and understanding of change initiatives and provision of professional development within the organisation. The exploratory interview questions were of a strategic nature. The second series of semi-structured interviews used a different set of questions that were more personal in nature and were designed to obtain views from across the organisation. The researcher and Training Coordinator negotiated and consequently identified a stratified sample of paid and volunteer staff from senior and middle management and other roles within the organisation to participate. An hour was scheduled for each of the 20 interviews that were conducted, recorded and transcribed. Fifty questionnaires were sent out and 80% were returned (Cohen and Manion, 1989).

Data from the questionnaires and interviews was analysed using SPSS version 14 and SPSS Text Analysis version 2. The results and implications of this research are outlined in the following section.

Findings from Research with a Charitable Organisation

This organisation, which comprised a business sector and two volunteer sectors, faced the challenge of embracing a more professional approach to remain viable. Change in the volunteer sector meant a different approach to the management of volunteers, centralisation of finances and provision of services to the community. Change in the business sector meant compliance with the standards required of a Recognised Training Organisation (RTO).

Workforce Diversity

Staff had a variety of backgrounds: 38% worked for more than one employer. For the primary employer staff worked between two to 90 hours per week. For the secondary employer staff worked between one to 22 hours per week. Employment conditions varied: 50% had a permanent position; 24% had a casual position and 22% were volunteers. Level of educational completed varied: 24% completed Year 10; 16% completed a TAFE Certificate; 27% completed a Bachelor Degree. Ages ranged from 19 years to 72 years. Workers were located across the state in three regions: north, northwest and south. Each region consisted of multiple divisions. Some had worked for the organisation for 30 years or more, others had been there less than six months.

Evidence of Practice-Based Learning

An exploratory interview with senior management identified one national non-formal program, three local formal courses leading to a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Certificate, and 11 local non-formal programs such as courses provided in-house or by private providers. Induction and performance management were carried out on an ad hoc basis. Staff participation in these forms of learning was determined by organisational need, legislation, job role, individual needs and cost. It was recognised that individuals had

different needs and aspirations. Senior management focused on learning for individuals rather than as a community of practice, little attention was given to informal or incidental learning and no time was allocated to staff meetings.

Results from the questionnaire identified that a significant amount of practice based learning occurred. Participation rates for the various types of learning were: formal education, such as university or TAFE - 60%; non-formal programs, such conferences and workshops - 95%; informal learning, such as mentoring - 78%; and incidental learning, such as learning as a result of doing the job – 89%. People spent an average of four hours per week on informal learning and approximately 1.5 hours per week on other forms of learning. These results indicated a strong presence of practice based learning within this organisation.

Results from 19 semi-structured interviews indicated that most people were engaged in practice based learning, some of which was simple, technical and immediately applicable to the current situation. Respondents raised issues related to access to practice-based learning and opportunities for applying their learning in the workplace.

Staff Access to Practice-Based Learning

The exploratory interview with senior management indicated that there was a positive attitude towards the provision of staff training. Senior management wanted to return the favour to volunteers by providing them with qualifications where possible but recognised that training could not be provided universally unless it was a legal requirement to do so. Not everyone was happy about being asked to participate. Conflict occurred when volunteers who had been trainers for many years were upset by the need to gain qualifications, the loss of being able to act as a trainer without qualifications and the stringent adherence to standards.

Results from the questionnaire indicated that 81% of staff had access to practice-based learning opportunities and that 73% of those offered these opportunities were happy with the situation. The key motivators for participation were relevance to the current job and interest in the topic. If there was a cost it was more likely to be borne by the employer than the staff member.

Interestingly a number of respondents in the semi-structured interviews commented that they had not received any professional development but then went on to describe courses they had done in relation to their current job. These respondents went on to talk about being thrown in the deep end and expected to survive, referring to a lack of induction to new roles. Respondents also commented about practice-based learning they had access to through another employer, not involved in this research, and to tertiary courses they had privately undertaken. Staff complained that the usefulness of their practice-based learning was stifled by a lack of opportunity to apply it in the workplace or to engage in collegiate discussion about professional practice.

Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Practice-Based Learning as a Tool for Workforce Development

Questionnaire results indicated that learning was perceived to meet personal needs on average for 85% of cases and organisational needs on average for 75% of cases. However there was a deep sense of frustration expressed by respondents in the semi-structured interviews. There was recognition of the generosity of the employer providing a certain level of training. The strongest complaints were that prior learning was not recognised sufficiently, communication was problematic and there was no opportunity for collegiate collaboration, networking and problem-solving. Some staff worked for more than one employer others had worked solely for this organisation for decades. Some of those with outside experience expressed frustration that the knowledge, skills and abilities they brought with them were not fully utilised or that they were given insufficient learning opportunities by this organisation. Commercial trainers expressed frustration that their knowledge, skills and abilities were not fully utilised, nor were they given time to meet as a group to discuss issues and experiences related to their roles. By completing the Training and Assessment (TAA) course trainers gained the legally required qualification but job roles within the organisation did not allow them to implement their learning. Senior management also commented on this in the exploratory interview and stated that, after training, people were quick to provide feedback, wanted to implement what they had learned and were frustrated when they could not.

Results from all instruments indicated that communication was problematic within this organisation. In the exploratory interview, senior management commented that independent research on numerous occasions had

identified communication as an issue but that nothing had ever been done to implement findings of previous research.

In the exploratory interview senior management identified three target areas for improvement. Firstly, workforce development should be linked to strategic and operational plans. Secondly, individual professional development plans that were reviewed every year should be established. Thirdly, the knowledge, skills and abilities that employees had should be utilised.

Discussion Relating Practice to Theory

This organisation used practice-based learning to develop its workforce in order to meet the challenge of embracing a more professional approach to remain viable. Even when faced with this challenge, change was illusive, past research was not acted upon and communication, which is the heart of interpersonal relationships, remained problematic. It was apparent that numerous formal practice-based learning opportunities existed for staff but that these did not always satisfy their emotional or practical needs and consequently the effectiveness of practice-based learning was diminished (Fullan, 2006).

In this case staff expressed their needs: to be recognised and allowed to use their knowledge, skills and abilities in their workplace; and to interact with peers in order to resolve practice related issues. This was consistent with literature about adult learning (Burns, 2002; Fenwick and Tennant, 2004; Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson, 2005).

The social elements of this workplace were largely absent. There was no time allocated for staff to meet. Human resource development was ad hoc or non-existent and staff worked in isolation from each other and from management. Current trends in literature related to workplace learning identified that learning occurred best within communities of practice, in which participants engaged with the activities and culture of the workplace with each other in order to resolve dilemmas. Ongoing open dialogue with different people from across the organisation was central to learning (Burns, 2002; Fenwick and Tennant, 2004; Gonczi, 2004).

A strategic approach to either the evaluation of practice-based learning or workforce development was not evident from this research. Comments made by senior management in the exploratory interview indicated that evaluation was based on observation; if staff were happier, knew more, stayed in the job and numbers and revenue increased then training was perceived to have been effective. Workforce development needs were identified and programs implemented but little was done to evaluate or review the outcomes of practice-based learning. A more strategic approach could benefit from input from organisational change and development literature, for example, Lewin concluded that action, research and training were necessary to bring about change (Dickens and Watkins, 1999; Lewin, 1946). Action had not occurred in response to previous research concerning this organisation, but there was evidence of training. Action learning was an effective change strategy, but tended to focus on the negative. Appreciative inquiry combined the process of action learning with a focus on building on existing strengths, after an initial diagnosis of the situation. Results of this current research could contribute to a diagnosis of organisational needs. The appointment of a suitably qualified and experienced change agent would help drive the change. Appropriate interventions to address strategic, interpersonal, technostructural and human resource management could be designed and implemented then evaluated and transferred into practice (Cady and Caster, 2000; Johnson and Leavitt, 2001; Waddell, Cummings, and Worley, 2004).

Conclusion

Key findings from this research indicate that the traditional model of workforce development that identified training needs, implemented, evaluated and reviewed a program had a limited degree of success. It is recommended that a community of practice with flexible structures and practices characterised by effective communication and lifelong learning be fostered in order to enhance workforce development, maximise the benefits of practice-based learning and balance individual and organisational needs. The services of a change agent, capable of addressing the adult learning and emotional needs of staff as well as organisational change and development concerns, could be enlisted to maximise the benefits of practice based learning. In this way issues of access and equity could be addressed by the implementation of appropriate organisational development interventions. Structures, such as staff meetings, should be put in place to allow time for staff to

engage in open, honest dialogue. An investigation into job design resulting in the reallocation of duties, to ensure that roles are balanced and promote the sustainability of the organisation, is recommended. This would be further enhanced by the implementation of human resource management interventions.

Centuries of tradition will only be built on and revitalised if communication can be open and ongoing between all members of the community of practice and that if together after discussion, goals can be set and strategies put in place to ensure that action is taken and becomes embedded in the everyday life of the organisation. Similar research to what was conducted with this organisation is planned and will be conducted with large public and private of organisations this year. Results of current and the future research could contribute to a better understanding of how best to enhance workforce development and achieve more sustainable change initiatives.

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