A learning partnership with a university: Some considerations for industry

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A learning partnership with a university: Some considerations for industry

Abstract: This paper examines a case study of a learning partnership between a non-government organisation and a university. The literature suggests that a learning partnership with a university presents some unique challenges and recommends that such a partnership is most useful for the transfer of tacit knowledge using thick or rich communication channels. Based on the analysis of data from the case study, the paper suggests seven principles that industry should use when forming a learning partnership with a university - build a long-term relationship, time and patience, scouting and negotiation, gaining familiarisation, flexibility and respect, the importance of the strategic plan and planning the learning environment.

Key words: adult learning, active learning, learning organisation, leadership development

For industry, innovation is now the mandate of the day and it has companies increasingly looking outside their own organizations for new ways to grow (Wright, 2008). This need for innovation means that workforce development and organisational capacity building are high on the agenda of most organizations, both commercial and government (Kearns 2005).

Accordingly, there has been a growing interest in three recent phenomena. Firstly, as competitive pressures increase, industry tends to find that they have neither the time nor the resources to internally create the knowledge needed to be competitively successful (Swan & Allred, 2003). Secondly, just as organizations are searching for new capabilities, sources of knowledge and means of growth, universities are looking for alternate sources of funds (Wright, 2008). Thirdly, industry is no longer satisfied with mere information transmission, rather there is a desire to ensure that the newly acquired knowledge is converted into significant organizational outcomes, as efficiently and effectively as possible. To achieve this efficient and effective conversion, managers and academics are utilising the workplace as the most authentic learning environment to develop a competent workforce ((eg. Billett, 2001; Boud & Solomon, 2001; Brown, 1998; Symes & McIntyre, 2000; Fuller & Unwin, 2004; Hager, 2004).

As Sherwood and Covin (2008) point out, though, the structuring and creating of a learning partnership by industry with an external knowledge source is critical to competitive success. However, as Wright (2008) cautions, ‘the single most important factor that determines whether a company will develop and sustain a successful relationship with a major institution of higher learning is the company’s preconceived ideal about how to work with the university’ (P. 75). While TAFE colleges
in Australia have been engaging successfully with industry for many years, Wright (2008) goes on to suggest that formulating a learning partnership with a university has a number of distinctive features. This paper will firstly explore the concept of forming learning partnerships before moving on to discuss the elements of work integrated learning. The results of a case study will then be discussed, with an emphasis on what industry can do to encourage a successful learning partnership with a university.

**Learning partnerships**

Research indicates that learning partnerships can be an effective means of accessing new knowledge (Deeds 2003). Lawton-Smith and Dickson (2003) suggest that compatibility, commitment, communications and common aims are critical factors in any partnership. However, two recent studies – Wright (2008) and Sherwood and Covin (2008) - have highlighted some specific issues in a learning partnership between industry and universities.

Wright (2008) suggests that, for corporations, learning partnerships with universities have some important differences – ‘seeing a university as a vendor rarely produces significant outcomes for a corporation” (p.76). Rather than merely buying a solution off the shelf, he suggests that universities are better suited to ‘supplying multiple solutions or [may] even approach the problem in such a way that it becomes clear that the corporation wasn’t even looking for the right solution in the first place’ (p.78). In examining a number of successful partnerships with universities, Wright (2008) identified three major factors: (1) the relationship moved beyond short-term vendor relationships and became lasting partnerships that built new capabilities for the company; (2) senior management was highly involved; and (3) the companies involved the universities in their strategy and not merely in a technical task or isolated problem.

Sherwood and Covin (2008) found that trust and familiarity had a significant influence on knowledge transfer. They found that trust was not a significant predictor of successful acquisition of explicit knowledge but that it was for tacit knowledge. The writers suggested that the reason for this is that explicit knowledge is potentially codifiable in form and therefore can be more easily verified while ‘tacit knowledge, by contrast, tends to be more ambiguous in scope, embedded in practice or skill sets, and difficult for the knowledge source to “surface” for conscious consideration and transference
purposes’ (p.177). This finding tends to confirm the contention of Wright (2008) that the learning partnership with universities should move beyond the vendor relationship to the more complex consultative knowledge relationship.

Secondly, Sherwood and Covin (2008) found that partner familiarity is predictive of knowledge acquisition success. Partner familiarity is based on prior experience. As two organizations interact, they gain a deeper understanding of one another’s procedures and ways of doing business, so the investigators were not surprised that familiarity was important. Wright (2008) also suggested that it was important for the corporation to ‘discover how to manage relationships with the often foreign environment of the university’ (p.80).

The third important aspect of the study by Sherwood and Covin (2008) was that the communication must be between the ‘technological experts’ of both organizations. Formal collaboration teams were not enough. Further, they recommend ‘in a university-industry alliance with at least some tacit knowledge to be transferred’ (p.178), the partners’ technology experts’ interactions should be based on thick communications channels. This assertion is supported by network theory which maintains that weak ties are more suited for acquiring codified explicit knowledge while strong ties are more suited to importing non-codified tacit knowledge (see Hansen, 2002; Regans & McEvily, 2003). Strong ties are signified by relationship strength (time spent developing the relationship, emotional intensity, mutual confiding and degree of reciprocity) and network density (the extent that network nodes are directly connected to each other) (Regans & Zuckerman, 2001).

In summary, in addition to the usual elements of compatibility, commitment, communications and common aims that should be present in any partnership, industry needs to consider three important features of a learning partnership with a university. First, the association needs to move beyond a vendor relationship to one of knowledge consultation. Second, and linked to this first point, the knowledge transfer should be about non-codified tacit knowledge not just explicit knowledge. Third, ensure that the interaction with the university faculty is with the organisation’s technology experts and their communication channels are thick and rich. Fourth, senior management must be highly involved. Fifth, involve the university staff in discussions about the organisation’s strategy and other critical dialogues. Sixth, actively gain familiarity about the university, its processes and its language.
Work integrated learning

Torraco (1999) believes that the evolution of work and of the expertise needed to perform it, have not been accompanied by innovations in the models used by educators to develop this expertise. Further, with the emergence of a ‘knowledge economy’ and ‘knowledge’ workers, industry and individuals now demand better alignment of learning curriculum to real work tasks (Symes & McIntyre, 2000; Tennant, 2000).

Accordingly, there has been heightened interest in work integrated learning where there is a dual emphasis on the development of both the learner and the organisation. The learner is not only required to demonstrate an understanding of new knowledge but must also apply that knowledge in ways that perceptibly benefit the organisation. This type of contextual learning is founded on the theory of constructivism because learners make meanings by contextualising the content within the learning environment in the workplace.

This type of contextual learning is founded on the theory of constructivism because learners make meanings by contextualising the content within the workplace learning environment, its culture and functions. Lave and Wenger (1991) call this ‘enculturation’ and explain that it takes place through legitimate peripheral participation. Their concept is endorsed by Bryans, Gormley, Stalker and Williamson (1998) who contend that the essence of contextualisation relies on enculturation to work groups, only available in authentic environments of the workplace. It is for this reason that the design of the curriculum, learning tasks and facilitation approaches need to be embedded and embodied in the cultural context of the workplace to make it more meaningful for individuals and their organisations. In essence, authentic learning environments such as the workplace provide experiences that are not teachable in other environments (Symes and McIntyre, 2000; Billett, 2007).

Achieving work integrated learning is what Mezirow (2000) calls a socio-cultural experience which shapes interpretations, meaning schemes and knowledge formation. Therefore, learning outcomes are likely to be complex. Models, such as the SOLO model (Biggs, 2003) and the Hierarchy of Learning Outcomes (Delahaye, 2005), indicate that such complex outcomes are likely to need more self-directed learning strategies. Therefore, to achieve constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003) work integrated learning is likely to depend on andragogical (see Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005)
learning strategies, the thick and rich communications channels of Sherwood and Covin (2008), such as problem-based learning, action learning or contract learning.

In summary, then, work integrated learning achieves the goal of efficient and effective learning that is demanded in modern workplaces. In addition, work integrated learning interlinks well with the findings of Sherwood and Covin (2008) and the proponents of network theory (for example, Hansen, 2002; Regans & McEvily, 2003) that the knowledge transfer should be about non-codified tacit knowledge not just explicit knowledge, and that the communication channels between the university faculty and the organisation’s technology experts are thick and rich.

The case study

The organisational setting is a Non-Government Organisation (NGO) with about 45 staff distributed across the state of Queensland in Australia. Its clients were volunteer groups who had access to government funding and who needed advice and support for workforce development. Initially, the NGO and the academics from the university formed an informal learning partnership. As negotiations progressed over a nine month period, this partnership became more formalised, with 14 worker-learners enrolling at the beginning of the second semester in 2006. The worker-learners are expected to complete the Graduate Certificate at the end of 2008.

An organization centred curriculum framework was collaboratively developed with the NGO. Teaching and assessment strategies were negotiated between the academics, learners and the NGO to meet the needs of individuals and the workplace. Learning strategies were interpreted as the combination of the learning processes and activities, and the assessment tasks to demonstrate that learning had occurred. The curriculum and delivery arrangements were also deliberated against the university policies, systems and structures.

A short evaluation, funded by a small teaching and learning grant from the university, was completed half way through the course. Data were collected from interviews with ten participants. A semi-structured proforma was used and all but two conversations were audio taped. The transcripts were analysed using the constant comparative analysis technique. The preliminary findings of the project were then presented to a focus group of interviewees for validation and discussion. This data from the
learners was supplemented with data from three other sources: academics involved in the course, and university managers and administrative staff; and the field notes and reflections of the authors. The results of the analysis of the data from the interviews and focus groups have been reported in previous journal articles and book chapters (Choy & Delahaye, 2008; Choy, 2007; Delahaye & Choy, 2007). This paper uses these reported results and also the reflections of the academics involved to provide practical recommendations for industry when contemplating the idea of a learning partnership with a university.

**Principles for forming a learning partnership**

Forming a learning partnership with a university is an important undertaking and this imperative requires the development and maintenance of a long term relationship. The following principles are designed for industry when considering a learning partnership. While a learning partnership is a complex relationship and will encompass a wide variety of issues and considerations, the following seven principles are key considerations identified by the writers.

**Build a long-term relationship**

As Wright (2008) emphasised, the organisation needs to ensure that the association with the university goes beyond a vendor relationship. The importance of building a strong and lasting relationship was emphasized by the Chief Executive Officer who said:

... it’s not just about the buying of a service from QUT, it’s actually about the establishment of a longer-term relationship that will, in my view, reap benefits for both organisations. ... I don’t think it’s rocket science, I think it’s actually about making sure that it is the respect, there’s the trust and there’s the relationship, and that’s how you work

Furthermore, a healthy relationship will foster access to extensive networks and new opportunities for the businesses of both parties. This first principle really projects an overarching value that should permeate the partnership for the full duration of the association.

**Time and patience**

The second principle is to recognize that any venture to broker and package a work integrated curriculum requires time and patience. This principle is linked strongly to the first. The organization should plan for a significant time investment of a variety of people. While, as Wright (2008) suggests,
senior management must be highly involved, other staff, such as the potential learners and the supervisors of the potential learners, should also be included. The planning itself requires several iterative discussions to ensure the interests of both organisations are maintained, and any assumptions are contested.

For industry, the key to this second principle is that the organization must plan for these staff to be given sufficient time, and then be encouraged and motivated, to be actively involved.

Scouting and negotiation

Ideally, in the initial stages, the organisation should interact with several universities. It is at this stage that the critical parameters of compatibility, commitment, communications and common aims suggested by Lawton-Smith and Dickson (2003) need to be assessed. The organisation may look at the types of content that is offered in current academic award units, what ITC resources the university offers and the credibility and abilities of the academic faculty. These academic abilities should not be just about the content area, but also encompass the academics’ experience in facilitating a variety of learning strategies.

Gaining familiarity

Sherwood and Covin (2008) emphasised the importance of familiarity in the transfer of non-codified tacit knowledge. Especially during the early phases of relationship building, agents representing both partners have to become active learners and share relevant pieces of information with appropriate users, including the potential learners. Organisational representatives negotiating the learning program need to gain a thorough understanding of the machinery of the university, its policies, procedures and processes will help negotiate and harmonise a format to achieve the agreed goals through negotiated learning arrangements.

The organization also needs to help the academics to research and analyse, in particular, the cultures of the organization and its key stakeholders. This step is highly recommended by Harris and Simons (2006). Organisational culture impacts on the ways that new ideas are viewed in an organisation and influences the interpretation of these into practice. The academic team needs to be aware of accepted practice in learning and development and, perhaps more importantly, what was not acceptable as normal practice.
In turn, the organization needs to be aware that the learning partnership, especially when based on work integrated learning, will have an impact on the organizational culture. As one of the worker-learners commented:

*This is helping in the development of a learning organisation culture as this information is also being shared more widely during staff meetings with staff not involved in the study.* (WFC 002)

**Flexibility and respect**

The fifth principle is about establishing parameters for flexibility that respect the standards and schedules of both partners. Typically, most industries operate on a financial year annual budget, so their representatives need to consider the learning processes, activities, outputs and outcomes in the context of their financial year annual plan and organisational curriculum and time lines. For a number of organisations, significant changes in their priorities often place learning as a lower priority. This means the cohort may need to take leave from the study for a semester, or there is a need to re-negotiate the sequence in the delivery of units, or replacement of a particular unit for the course where the new unit would better meet their emerging priority or change in direction.

Universities, on the other hand, operate on a calendar year time line. This means that academic foundational subject units commence in February, which is over half way through the industry financial year. In addition, universities have to advise the Federal government, at the beginning of each calendar year, of the specific subject units that will be offered in each semester. This may mean that a university may not be able to offer a unit at a time that is most benefit to the organization.

Finally, universities are charged with maintaining academic standards. Normally, the content and assessment of each unit has to progress through a lengthy approval period. Changing the content and/or assessment of subject units may not be as easy as either party would like. On this final point, though, the writers found that a little creativity did help to overcome certain bureaucratic obstacles and, in this case study, changes to content and assessment required by the organization was always successfully achieved.

These types of situations will need strategies to accommodate changes to help industries justify expenditure and return on investment for sponsorship. Furthermore, to meet the timelines of the industry as well as the university’s semesters of six month duration and course durations of two to four
years, industry needs to negotiate timelines that can be accommodated for the purposes of both partners.

**Strategic plan**

The imperatives of the organisation’s strategic plan do need to drive both the learning partnership and the design of work integrated learning. This link between the strategic intent of the organisation and leadership development is strongly recommended by writers such as Miller and Desmarais (2007) and Pepe (2007).

The organization needs to ensure, firstly, that there is a common understanding and interpretation of the strategic plan. In this case study, the academics (cultural outsiders) needed to recontest the various translations given for them to gain a thorough understanding. During this recontesting stage, the academics discovered a variety of interpretations on various aspects of the intended strategic plan. This was not surprising, as Mintzberg, Quinn, and Voyer (2003) explain that beyond the written official strategic plan (the intended plan), of equal importance are the dynamic emergent strategic plans.

It was through on-going discussions over a period of nine months that both the academics and the NGO staff reached a somewhat common understanding of how the course would help achieve the strategic direction of the organisation. Such time commitments for pre-course preparations are often underestimated and unappreciated (Harris & Simons, 2006).

While ensuring a common understanding of the strategic plan was held by all stakeholders was time consuming, the time investment was undoubtedly valuable. As a senior manager commented:

*So how do we manage a range of strategies? I guess what QUT was able to do was actually say, well, we’re happy to work within that broader strategy.* (WFC 003)

A worker-learner commented:

*Certainly it guided us to rethink about reference groups and our workplace plan and network that we had and sort of reshaped those two groups and [became] clearer about their roles and responsibilities.* (WFC09)

Two other important issues needed to be considered within the strategic plan. Firstly, as the learning partnership with a university is best designed for the transfer of non-codified tacit knowledge, then the
strategic plan should be used to identify and define the areas of critical tacit knowledge that are needed. Secondly, the assessment, that the university will use to ensure that academic standards, should be guided by the organizational needs defined by the strategic plan.

**Plan the learning environment**

The final principal for the industry organisation is to plan the learning environment. There are at least two important aspects. Firstly, as the work integrated learning will be based on non-codified tacit knowledge, the learning strategies will be based on self-directed learning. Do not assume that all staff are self-directed learners. Raise this issue with the academics who will facilitate the learning. They will need to take specific action – such as conducting short self-development courses and designing the work integrated learning on a ‘successive approximations schedule’ (see, for example, Delahaye, 2005) – to gradually develop the learners to a stage that they are content with being independent learners. In the case study, several worker-learners were uncomfortable with the role of being a self-directed learner. A typical comment was:

…I didn’t enjoy doing those objectives at all. You know when we had to work out our own learning objectives I struggled because I guess I’m just used to people giving it to me and just having to work with it and not really questioning it… (WFC 002)

However, others did enjoy the responsibility, a typical comment being:

>Certainly being able to set the assessment and discuss the assessment was really good. Yeah, it made it applied and you know, very work focused which was good. (WFC 008)

Secondly, the organisation needs to plan and arrange for work place affordances and learning spaces. Learning spaces include the time the worker-learners can study during work time and physical locations in which they may learn. Work place affordances include the psychological support given to the worker-learners by management as well as the individual affiliations, associations and language skills (Billett, 2004). Billett (2004) goes on to warn that such work place affordances are contestable and may not be equally available ( for example, one learner may have the chief executive for a mentor but another a middle manager). The worker-learners reported that this issue of learning spaces and work place affordances were of most concern in the case study. As one commented:
They never said you can only take two hours a week for QUT or anything, but maybe just them specifying exactly what time you’re allowed to use and is it okay to do this study instead of this other thing that you usually do once a fortnight or something like that (WFC 002).

**Conclusion**

In this case study, the learning partnership and the use of work integrated learning was successful. As part of the evaluation, the CEO said:

*So it actually became an interplay between partners rather than just necessarily an exchange between us buying a service from the university. … in this instance, QUT was able to provide us with the flexibility and scope that we needed.*

Some typical comments from the worker-learners included:

*It was a very positive experience. I would have to say I was nervous leading up to it, but it was a really good atmosphere of sharing knowledge and ideas based upon work practice and then projecting those ideas on how we could improve the way we work and we practise* (WFC 005)

*The fact that it was so work based and work placed, so relevant to what I was doing and I guess that the whole organisation was involved. The CEO was keen to do it. My manager was keen to do it. The other managers were keen to do it. It was that ‘wow let’s do it, this is exciting’.* (WFC 007)

There are a variety of variables that can affect a learning partnership. When reflecting on the experience and reviewing the results of the data analysis, the writers believe that the seven principles reported in this paper did contribute significantly to the apparent success. Certainly, the first principle – building a long-term relationship – was notably important. Both parties commenced negotiations with an open mind. Although neither party was aware of the criticality of this principle, the people involved held the principle as a personal value. It was not until some time later that the writers realized just how important it was. Being patient and taking the time to negotiate and discuss concepts and differences also paid off. This period of negotiation and scouting established the familiarity and trust on which the long-term partnership was based. Understanding the organizations strategic plan, while a little tedious at times, was essential to the design of the learning and also the assessment. The need to plan and design learning spaces and work place affordances was not fully realized during the initial stages of the case study but the outcomes had to be addressed quite constantly in the initial stages.
Above all, this case study showed that, for a learning partnership to succeed, both parties have to invest significant periods of time and also be willing to become active learners.

References


