Using work integrated learning for management development: Some key elements for success.

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the use of work integrated learning as a means of developing managers and instituting strategically directed change in an organisation. A brief description of the case study organisation and the design of the organisation centred curriculum based on a learning cohort are provided. Eight key elements of the design are then identified and discussed. These elements include understanding the strategic plan of the host organisation, understanding the culture of the host organisation, use of andragogical principles, use of blended learning, use of a learning cohort and learning teams, assessment leading to change, the construction of knowledge reservoirs and the need for flexibility on the part of the university.

Keywords: management development, adult learning, organisational learning, organisational change management, human resource development, workforce capacity building.
Workforce development and organisational capacity building are high on the agenda of government as well as industry (DEST 2003; Kearns 2005). An issue for universities is the disquiet of clients, both organisational and individual, about the traditional didactic presentation of university defined knowledge. Torraco (1999) believes that the nature of work continues to evolve from predictable, deterministic patterns to forms that are more contingent and idiosyncratic. However, he goes on to assert that the evolution of work, and of the expertise needed to perform it, have not been accompanied by innovations in the models used by workplace educators to develop this expertise. The paternalistic approach where universities decide what is best for clients is being strongly challenged. Rather, with the emergence of ‘knowledge economy’ and ‘knowledge’ workers, industry and individuals now demand better alignment of learning curriculum to real work tasks and to organisational strategic demands.

A variety of scholars, learners and employers agree that the workplace provides the most authentic learning environment for a competent workforce (e.g., Billett 1992; Deissinger & Hellwig, 2005; Hager, 2004; Harris & Simons, 1999; Harris, Simons & Clayton, 2005). The workplace provides a context for learners to transform and construct vocationally and socially meaningful knowledge and skills (Billett & Boud 2001; Brown, 1998). 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. Learning spaces and experiences based in the workplace can be designed to optimise the transfer of knowledge leading to improved outcomes for learners and their host organisation.

Bryans, Gormley, Stalker and Williamson (1998) assert that the essence of contextualisation of learning relies on enculturation to work groups only available in authentic environments of the workplace. According to Lave and Wenger (1991) such enculturation takes place through legitimate peripheral participation. Learning in the workplace is an integral part of the culture and capacity building. Besides, authentic learning environments such as the workplace provide experiences that are not teachable in other environments. This makes workplace pedagogies useful epistemological tools
for facilitation (Symes & McIntyre 2000). Therefore, 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 the organisation. To achieve this design, work integrated learning needs to go beyond the dichotomy of learning versus performance (for a discussion see Garavan, Gunnigle and Morley, 2000) and encompass a more holistic approach, using what Simmonds and Pedersen (2006) term an Orchestra model that emphasises the paradigms of movement, change, dynamism’ harmony and unity.

However, writers such as Ellstrom (2002) believe that, in spite of a widespread belief in the importance of integrating learning and work, little is known about the conditions that promote such integration. This paper describes how one university created a partnership with a small-medium enterprise (SME) to develop the workforce and enhance organisational leadership capacity using the authentic learning within the workplace.

**WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING**

Of importance to this discussion is the difference between work-based learning and work-integrated learning. Hamilton and Hamilton (1997) identify a number of work-based learning approaches including visits to workplaces, work-like experiences, apprenticeships and co-operative education. Co-operative education is, typically, a compulsory element in most tertiary education courses. The expectation of students in such a program is to identify and, where possible, apply relevant theory, acquire knowledge of the organisation / industry in which they are working and recognise the role of ethics in business. In short, the emphasis here is generally on the individual development of the student.

In work-integrated learning, 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 - that is, the movement in Simmonds and Pedersen’s (2006) Orchestra model - but must also apply that
knowledge in ways that perceptibly benefit the organisation – the change, dynamism, harmony and unity of the Orchestra model. 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. As an authentic learning site, the workplace provides a context for learners to transform and construct vocationally and socially meaningful knowledge and skills (Billett & Boud 2001; Brown, 1998).

While the organisational environment is an important determinant of work-integrated learning, the social context of groups within the organisation also has a dynamic effect. The importance of social group influences and interpersonal factors in management development has been recognised for some time (see, for example, Houle 1972 and Rush 1976). Key writers in adult and management development (see, for example, Knowles 1998 and Revans 1988) have stressed that learning is a social activity. Mezirow (1991) also contends that learning is a socio-cultural experience which shapes interpretations, meaning schemes and knowledge formation. Mezirow goes on to caution that social and cultural changes are on a continuum and so stresses that learning designers and facilitators need to realise and recognise transformations in learning.

For the project discussed in this paper, it was recognised that the workplace provides access to, and familiarity and understanding of, this continuum in a way that allows learners to capably contextualise and become ‘knowledge’ workers. The authenticity of the workplace, as a significant site for learning, presents the dynamism of the socio-cultural aspects. Accordingly, a central theme of the work-integrated learning process described in this paper was the use of a learning cohort.

**THE LEARNING SITE**

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 workplace development. Staff in the
NGO were advised of the opportunity to engage in the learning and, after a number of information sessions, 14 volunteered to become part of the learning cohort. The learning cohort enrolled in the Graduate Certificate in Education (Executive Leadership). This course consisted of four units – Leadership and Change, Politics of Diversity and Identity, Knowledge Management and Changing Agendas in Leadership.

Initially, the NGO and the academics from the university formed an informal learning partnership. As negotiations progressed over a six month period, this partnership became more formalised, with 14 worker-learners enrolling at the beginning of the second semester 2006.

After several reflective sessions, the following key elements were identified by the academics as important to the success, so far, of the program.

**KEY ELEMENTS**

The central tenet of the design was workforce capacity building, the sustainability of the learning and continued viability of the organisation. Based on this central tenet, there are at least eight key elements that need to be considered when a university and a host organisation become involved in a learning partnership that is based on work integrated learning – understanding the strategic plan of the host organisation, understanding the culture of the host organisation, use of andragogical principles, use of blended learning, use of a learning cohort and learning teams, assessment leading to change, the construction of knowledge reservoirs and the need for flexibility on the part of the university.

**The strategic plan**

Most modern management writers reinforce the critical nature of strategic planning to the continued viability of any organisation. Davidson and Griffin (2006) describe strategic planning as a consciously developed formal activity that explicitly maps out the future actions of an organisation through a detailed specification of objectives, programs, budgets and operations. The host organisation’s strategic plan, therefore, had to be at the centre of the framework, both figuratively and practically.
The change intervention had to ensure that the resultant outcomes would progress overtly the strategic intent of the organisation. In this, the design followed a capabilities perspective (Garavan et al 2000) in that there was an overt emphasis on the enhancement of the productive capacity of the organisation (p.82) and an assumption that the relationship between the organisation and the employee was characterised by free choice and rational decision making (p.84).

While acknowledging that the formal practice described by Davidson and Griffin (2006) is the intended strategic plan, Mintzberg, Quinn and Voyer (2003) see the strategic planning process as somewhat more complicated. They go onto to suggest that there is also an emergent strategic plan which is the result of managers attempting to deal with a dynamic and changing external environment. This emergent strategic process gradually changes, re-interprets, de-emphasises and re-emphasises certain aspects of the intended strategic plan.

This complicated view of strategic planning became evident during the initial negotiations with the host organisation. While the organisation had a formal and written strategic plan, there were varying interpretations and challenges to the intent and meanings of the written word by the members of the organisation. As well as attempting to understand the strategic intent of the organisation, the academics found that they were facilitating a process where the members of the host organisation came to a common interpretation. In addition, the academics found that they were engaged in what Mezirow (1991) termed reflective discourse, as they tried to understand the organisational language and helped the organisational members understand the academic language of strategic management and the management of change.

The critical nature of the strategic plan, therefore, imposed two imperatives on the designers:

1. The designers had to fully understand the strategic plan and direction of the organisation.
2. The designers had to ensure that there was a universal and common interpretation of the strategic plan by the potential students in the program and the management of the organisation.
This comprehension and clarifying process took over six months of monthly meetings but proved to be critical to the ultimate success of the endeavour. The view that the process was one of a learning partnership between the organisation and the university was crucial, as were the transparency of engagement and the acknowledgement of mutual benefits to both parties. Trust between the parties in learning partnerships is paramount (Deeds 2003).

This six month period was not solely devoted to the strategic plan. Concomitantly, the academics were gaining an understanding of the organisational culture, maintaining and expanding their currency of industry knowledge and also publicising the potential of the developmental process to the worker-learners.

Organisational culture

Organisational culture is usually described as the ‘taken-for-granted’ values, underlying assumptions, expectations, collective memories and definitions present in an organisation (Cameron and Quinn 1999). Organisational culture will affect the ways that new ideas are viewed in an organisation and will also influence the interpretation of the new ideas into practice. As Nichols (2007: 3) commented, ‘culture eats strategy for lunch’. Therefore, the program design needed to recognise that the strategic intent would be interpreted and translated by the organisation’s philosophies and culture.

It was important that the designers achieved some level of awareness of the culture in the host organisation. Firstly, the designers needed to be aware of accepted practice in learning and development in the organisation and, perhaps more importantly, what was not acceptable as normal practice. For example, the potential learners were all comfortable with using the internet as a means of accessing knowledge. On the other hand, there was some early evidence that the potential students were more used to the dependence-reliant training processes rather than the self-activating learning processes of independent learning that is often a prerequisite for work integrated learning.
Secondly, the designers needed to have some assurance that the organisational culture was acceptably supportive of the strategic plan. With a number of the potential learners having a background in social work, the *raison d’etre* of the organisation to provide support to community organisations did appear to parallel individual values.

**Andragogical principles**

Given that the worker-learners would have the responsibility of converting the theoretical concepts covered in the graduate certificate course into work-based change, the decision to emphasise adult learning (or andragogical) values was somewhat axiomatic. Malcolm Knowles is widely regarded as one of the key proponents of adult learning. In his influential text *The adult learner. A neglected species* he established the basic tenets of adult learning that are summarised by Delahaye (2005: 35) as:

- The learning should be relevant to the real-life situations and problems of the learner. This enhances the motivation of the learner as well as embedding the new learning into a context.
- The learning should incorporate the rich experiences of the adult learners, thus utilising that abundant resource, the tacit knowledge of the adult.
- The learning should involve the adult learner, at least to some extent, so that the individual’s sense of self-responsibility ensures that the learning is transferred back to the operational site.

Another influential thinker in the process of adult learning was Carl Rogers who believed that adults are different in the learning context because they:

- Are in a continuing process of growth, not at the start of a process
- Bring with them a package of experience and values
- Come to the learning experience with intentions
- Bring expectations about the learning process
- Have competing interests
- Already have their own set patterns of learning

(cited in Long 2002: 47-48)

By using these principles of adult learning, the designers were attempting to lift the motivation of the learning cohort from what Biggs (1989) termed the *utility* level of motivation to the *achievement* and preferably the *interest* level of motivation. In utility motivation the learner is interested in some other
outcome (for example, employment) only, while with achievement motivation learners are in a competitive mode (for example, must maintain a certain level of grade point average). The interest level of motivation occurs where the learner is intensely interested in the topic content itself – the details and the interrelations are all fascinating. In addition, this emphasis on andragogical assumptions assumed the psychological contract perspective of HRD in that the design advocated a person-focused provision of learning with an emphasis on lifelong learning and career development (Garavan et al. 2000, 84).

The designers recognised, though, that people did not always readily assume the mantle of being self-directed learners. The initial unit was designed to commence as a structured learning strategy with the knowledge being defined and presented by the academics. The learners were then encouraged to take increasing responsibility for their own learning and look to their peers – who Revans (1988) defined as “comrades in adversity” – for support rather than relying on the facilitating academic. In this self-directed mode, learners were encouraged to engage others in conceptualising and consolidating the effectiveness of proposed changes and practice. This inclusion of peers encouraged the capacity building within the organisation.

Blended learning

Russell (2004) defines blended learning as a process that uses technology (for example, video conferences, the Internet, e-mail) combined with face-to-face teaching. Delahaye (2005) believes that blended learning, when compared to e-leaning, has more potential to develop tacit, informal and socially embedded learning and goes on to point out that blended learning needs either a well structured pathway or assumes that the individuals are self-directed learners.

Blended learning, therefore, paralleled the andragogical assumptions of the learning design. In addition, the worker-learners were well acquainted with electronic communication as their work was predicated on this form of communication. The organisation had a well designed information and
computer technology (ICT) system. In addition, the university had a readily accessible external program based on e-learning called On-line Learning and Teaching (OLT).

The blended learning, then, consisted of an initial orientation workshop of half a day before the commencement of the semester and on-site visits by the facilitating academic once a fortnight. To complement this face-to-face interaction, the learners were given access to the OLT site for the unit where they could download specific topic orientated study guides, unit information, selected readings and other resources. The learners also had access to data banks of journals through the university library as well as the usual search engines for the internet and e-mail access to the facilitator.

**Use of a learning cohort and learning teams**

Learning cohorts comprise groups of students who enrol and study the same units - in the same sequence, and graduate together. Cohort programs have been highly successful because the continuity in the group’s learning journey strengthens the stability of the community of learners who grow to know each other and count on one another for support (Lawrence 2002). They use the power of interpersonal relations to learn and maintain motivation (Saltiel & Russo 2001). This design approach assumes the collective learning/organisational learning perspective (Garavan et al, 2000, 84) in that it advocated “the optimisation of organisational learning and the creation of a learning climate, where employees utilize their resources and skills in the interests of facilitating continuous learning”.

According to Nesbit (2001) cohort groups facilitate transformative learning using critical reflections. Research has shown positive effects such as increased critical thinking skills, greater individual development, enhanced knowledge base and learning motivation (Imel 2002). The participatory nature of learning, when cohort members share their experiences, and the application of theory into practices enrich the construction of knowledge in their community. Saltiel and Russo (2001) argue that cohorts are often more innovative and demand new approaches to teaching and assessment. These demands may challenge existing institutional approaches, policies and procedures.
Importantly, the learning cohorts provided a critical mass to incite and sustain high impact responsiveness to emerging issues and opportunities, as well as innovation in the workplace. In addition, the cohort operated as a community of learners and implemented changes resulting from the transfer and application of new knowledge and understanding gained from the study units in the course.

To enhance the andragogical theme, the 14 learners were divided into three teams of four to five members. As the first unit focused on the management of change, each team was given responsibility for a topic area – accountability, organisational and environmental cultures and change management. Using teams as a learning support strategy had four aims. Firstly, there was the support of the ‘comrades in adversity’ (Revans 1988). Secondly, the teams investigated a specific area and, in doing so, built a library of journals, tools, resources and other reading materials for that topic (see reservoirs of knowledge, discussed later). Thirdly, there was an element of competition between the teams which increased the quality of each team’s output. Fourthly, each member of the team became the organisation’s ‘expert’ in the topic area. Thus the teams became a risk management strategy in that, if any one person left the organisation, the loss of knowledge and expertise was minimised.

Assessment leading to change

It was essential that the assessment tasks reflected the application of the theoretical concepts to the workplace. This emphasis ensured that at least some change did occur to the work tasks and processes of the organisation. Further, as the assessment questions were based on the strategic plan of the organisation, the changes coming from the assignments were orientated to the strategic direction of the organisation.

Secondly, to encourage the dissemination of the new knowledge, the assignments were based on a public sharing of the individual and team findings. Accordingly, the knowledge expertise of each team was shared at an assessment workshop and by group assignments which were part of the assessment process of the unit. In addition, the written assignments became a resource for the organisation.
Knowledge reservoirs

The learning process described in this paper essentially built what Debowski (2006) calls reservoirs of knowledge. These reservoirs were made up of both explicit knowledge (the reading materials and assignments which were kept in readily identifiable folders) and tacit knowledge (the knowledge in the minds of the team members). The tacit knowledge of the team members was important as, not only did each team member possess the content knowledge of the specific content, but also had knowledge on how the content could be applied to the work tasks and processes of the organisation. The process closely mirrors the knowledge storing advocated by Probst, Raub and Romhardt (2000) of ensuring that knowledge is contained by individuals (the learners), groups (the collective memory of the learning cohorts) and physical/electronic knowledge bases (the reading materials and assignments).

Flexibility on the part of the university

During the three phases of negotiation, design and implementation, the academics found that they were continually challenged by the needs of the client and the limitations of the university processes that were formulated for traditional learning. For example, the client wanted to commence with a unit that emphasised the management of change. The faculty had only one such unit, but that was only available in the first second semester and could not be offered in the second because of rules governed by the Department of Education, Science and Training. The designers overcame this by using a ‘shell’ unit that was available for new experimental units. Further, the client did not want some of the topics available in the original change management unit and also wanted additional topics. The unit that was finally offered to the client was approximately 30 percent new material. Normally, such changes would have required lengthy approval, but the experimental ‘shell’ unit allowed the designers the flexibility needed.

There were a number of additional tasks met by the academics that were not covered by their workload agreements. The client wished to have the presence of one of the academics at their location
for several hours once a fortnight, a time cost that was not acknowledged originally in the school teaching timetable. During the implementation of the unit, the groups asked for group assessment rather than individual assessment. The academic teaching the unit re-designed the assessment processes, although the re-design and conduct of this new assessment process took more time. Individually these additional tasks were relatively small, but in total became a significant added workload needing constant re-negotiation with the university management. There were also additional cash costs, such as taxi fares for travel to and from the consultations, which added up to several hundred dollars by the end of the semester – quite a strain on the school’s minimal budget. Surprisingly, the enrolment processes, needing group enrolment and payment as adverse to the usual individual approach, progressed very smoothly. This was, perhaps, due to the personal involvement of an administrator who guided the group application through the system.

Universities considering work integrated learning as a way of expanding their markets will need to re-consider their administrative processes. In the case covered in this paper, the challenges were met, predominantly, with a creative approach by a variety of university staff. But these creative efforts did come at a cost of time, money and energy. Rather, user-friendly administrative infrastructure is needed to allow a more efficient processing of these varying and unpredictable demands.

CONCLUSION

The work integrated learning approach to curriculum design using learning cohorts has been deemed successful to date. The CEO of the organisation has publicly stated his high level of satisfaction with the progress of the organisation. A feature of the assessment processes has been the use of symposiums where teams made public presentations on their progress. Other academics and outside stakeholders invited to these symposiums have provided feedback indicting that the best feature of the presentations was the evidence of the application of the learnings to work tasks and the obvious changes within the organisation to meet its strategic targets. Of the fourteen people who commenced the graduate certificate, nine re-enrolled the following semester. One person had been promoted to a
position outside the organisation, one left for overseas and three people considered that their organisational workload in the second semester precluded their involvement. The academics note that the concept of ‘learning spaces and affordances’ (see Billett 2001) are important issues to consider when using work integrated learning and should be investigated further.

The organisation appears to be achieving its aims of workforce capacity building and accomplishing strategic objectives. The university now has another option for expanding its market. More specifically, the academics involved have had a rich opportunity to maintain and improve their industry knowledge and the satisfaction of seeing conceptual principles, such as andragogy, strategic planning and the management of organisational culture, as being successful parameters for organisational change.

At the time of writing this paper, the academics are conducting a research project, funded by a university small teaching and learning grant, to identify:

- A prototype framework for a cohort learning delivery approach based in industry.
- A set of principles for university staff developing learning partnerships with industry to facilitate cohort learning delivery approach.
- A set of principles for industry to engage in a partnership with QUT for sponsored learning cohorts in the workplace.
- The impact of work integrated learning on the organisation.

This research project will provide a more detailed examination of the elements needed for the successful use of work integrated learning.

The overall design of the program utilized all three of Garavan et al’s (2000) three perspectives of HRD emphasising the assumptions of the capabilities perspective, the psychological perspective and the collective learning/organisational learning perspective. The designers tried to epitomise the contention of Simmonds and Pedersen (2006, 132) that “the future of HRD lies squarely in the need to embrace the inextricably interrelated paradigms of movement (where people have developed from);
change (and especially the rate of change); dynamism (provided from leadership); and harmony and unity (resulting from cohesive partnership)."

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