LIFE-LONG LEARNING AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OBLIGATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The literature affirms that widespread lapses in corporate social responsibility obligations (unethical behaviors) have periodically brought about extensive forfeitures of economic wealth and countless job losses leaving the world economy in recession or depression. Put forth as a resolution to unemployment issues the academic literature champions the idea of life-long learning as a way to prepare our workforce for the changing nature of occupations. The purpose of this work-in-process report is to provide insight into the progress of my research for advocating an inclusion of social responsibility obligations into life-long learning agendas. It is my belief that inclusion will advance life-long identification and edification of higher social responsibility obligations for all levels of society.

KEYWORDS

Life-long learning; ethics; social responsibility

1. INTRODUCTION

We are all familiar with the ethical scandals that brought Enron to its knees. But most of the world does not know that "the Chernobyl power plant disaster resulted from a meltdown of ethics by Soviet engineers" (Jadwin 2006 :72). While Enron brought financial ruin to thousands, Chernobyl brought death, disease, and displacement to countless thousands for years to come.

Moreover, findings from my research of the academic literature clearly support lapses in social responsibility obligations (unethical behaviors) by some of our leading financial firms and related industries led to the latest downturn of economic activity. As a result of this phenomenon the US and the world economy has faced substantial capital depreciation, significant job losses, high unemployment rates, and economic instability (Pacitti 2011). Consequently, the literature champions the idea of sustaining cultures which support life-long learning as part of a broader global economic solution (Young 2001). Organizations like the International Association for the Development of the Information Society (IADIS) and its International Cognition and Exploratory Learning in the Digital Age (CELDA) 2013 conference are working to define the future of life-long learning. As stewards of this process we must foster life-long learning environments that will include an awareness of social responsibility obligations. It is with this thought I recognize IADIS's CELDA 2013 conference as an opportunity to share my research.

2. PURPOSE

This paper outlines my research progress on the concept of life-long learning as the vehicle which supports both organizational and individual social responsibility obligations (ethics). This genre of research is important because it raises awareness and provides guidance for shaping cultures of life-long learning for social responsibility obligations. I report that my research efforts are primarily in the literature review stage. I have gathered over 500 documents written by academics from all over the world using EBSCOHOST (licensed through the University of North Texas). My efforts have afforded me articles relating to human resource development (field), ethics (problem), knowledge management (solution) and life-long learning (solution). From this work and future studies we can ascertain the importance of life-long learning experiences and supporting cultures for guiding individuals and organizations though the life-long ethically charged minefield. The following sections explain some of the main concepts from the reviewed literature.

2.1 Society's Major Challenge

Collins (2008:614) emphasizes that "life-long learning has emerged as one of the major challenges for the worldwide knowledge society of the future." An educated and well trained agile work force is essential to economic success. The same can be said for fulfilling life-long social responsibility obligations. As technologies and events change, human beings will be faced with serious choices involving both technical competencies and ethical decisions. It is self-evident that as the US becomes deeply entrenched into the global economy, and information and technologies race to levels far exceeding our comprehension, a societal need for the fulfillment of social responsibility obligations and the embracement of life-long learning are necessary for our social and economic survival. No society, even a highly educated society can prosper without a sense of moral duty and social responsibility.

2.2 Life-Long Learning

Life-long learning needs to be differentiated from life-long education and job preparation activities. According to Galbraith (1995:8) "life-long learning are those changes in one consciousness that take place throughout one's life span which results in an active and progressive process of comprehending intellectual, societal, and personal changes which confront each individual". With this definition in mind, it is easy to understand the importance of rejuvenating our awareness and understanding of social responsibilities. Galbraith (1995) further contends that life-long education is a process of both deliberate and unintentional opportunities that assist and encourage life-long learning. It is conferences like CELDA that provide the opportunities to educate it members about social responsibility obligations as well and encourage their work in establishing these connections to life-long learning projects.

While governments cannot be expected to solve all facets of organizational and individual social responsibility obligations, governments are influential components of life-long learning. In that context, my research confirms the governments all over the world understand the important of life-long learning. The US, EU, Australia and other developing countries have legislated life-long learning programs (Youngs, Ohsako, Medel-Anonuevo, & United Nations Educational, S. n. (Germany). Inst. for Education 2001; Watson 1999). The US in particular has a series of legislated acts: the *Higher Education Act* of 1998, 2010, and 2011; the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001; and the *Life-long Learning Act* of 2008 (Young, Grant, Montbriand & Therriault 2002; 107th Congress 2001; Scott, United States & United States 2010; United States 2011)

Most notable of the acts is the *Life-long Learning Act* of 2008 which specifically instructs the Internal Revenue Service to modify the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 establishing citizen life-long learning accounts as a funding incentive for citizens to take advantage of life-long learning opportunities (H.R.6036 2008). Our citizens can contribute earned income into a tax-free savings account to be used for continuing education. The United States has emphatically demonstrated its support for life-long learning. While this program, by its nature, provides support for people with disposable income at a level where income taxes are weighty, it is a significant step in establishing a mentality that life-long learning is important and provides a vehicle for its implementation. Tax policy has long been used to influence the behavior of its citizens. The deduction for interest costs on a mortgage payment has long promoted a culture of home ownership. Thus, it follows there is potential for life-long learning accounts encouraging a culture of life-long learning.

Lest we feel that it is not our responsibility to promote social responsibility awareness within a life-long learning context, we need to examine what the US government legislates and take up partnership with their ideas and efforts.

2.3 Social Responsibility Obligations (Ethics)

Much like the topic of life-long learning there is much research in the US, Europe, Australia, and other developed countries on the broad topic of corporate social responsibly.

According to Matten and Moon (2004) corporate social responsibly is an umbrella topic that includes business and social relations as well as business ethics. For my research I broaden the topic even more to an organizational level that includes business, government, and other forms of organizations or agencies that are comprised of individuals. While organizational social responsibility obligations are often formulated from laws, regulations, and accepted best practices, ultimately they are executed in an environment based upon the

culmination of individuals' collective life's experiences. Thus, individuals with their learned morals and personally developed value systems are the deciding factor for all organizational social responsibility obligations. However, as individuals, what we learn as a child is reshaped over and over again as we encounter our educational culture, our social culture, then onto our employment culture. While there is much debate about "nature verses nurture" across every social behavior theory much research extends the theory that morals and values are learned concepts (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci 1994; Bors 1994; Doring 2010). My interest in this research stems from my personal family experiences. If I may share a personal story that many of us can relate to:

"I personally learned many of my values and resulting personal ethical behaviors from having parents who promoted good family ethical behaviors. I can recount a single experience that shaped many of my values and my resulting personal ethical behavior more than anything else. When I was about six years old, while shopping with my mother, I stole an animal-shaped rubber eraser. When I exhibited my treasure to my mother, she explained that to take something that was not my property was stealing and wrong. She further added that the eraser was the store owner's property and would miss the benefit of owning it. She had me return it to the store owner with my apology. The mental image that most impressed me was that the store owner was a person. I understood I had hurt or had the potential to hurt that person. It was a lesson learned that is still vivid in my memory. My personal story emphasizes that our own personal ethical behaviors are built upon a combination of learned values from our experiences in combination with an ability to see beyond our own self-interests" (Mayes 2013:1).

My experiences and the literature suggest that over a lifetime humans build a value bank which they will use to draw upon when faced with ethical decisions (Doring 2010). Moreover, individuals feel better when they comply with what they have learned from personal experiences. According to research, humans also build an empathy bank created from positive personal experiences. When we understand how other people feel and perceive their reality we find our ethical behavior in line with what others would expect from us (Kasser, Koestner & Lekes 2002). Whereas, organizations can establish well defined value banks they cannot possess empathy per se. However, their leadership and members collectively can. It is not an overstatement to say that the organization's culture (people) provides both formal and informal ethical guidance that provides a constant reinforcing to the value and empathy banks. Thus, reinforcement of social responsibility obligations is an important part of any life-long learning culture.

4. CONCLUSION

LeClair & Ferrell (2000) posits that an understanding of our values is important to our self-efficacy regarding ethical behaviors. For that reason, I believe that cultures of life-long learning must to be created and nurtured in order to propagate ethical behaviors by our citizenship. My research is based upon the challenge that if our society supports cultures of life-long learning it must include effective methods that edify understandings and self-awareness of social responsibility obligations.

With organizations like IADIS working to define the future of life-long learning via the latest advances in supporting technologies, they must foster life-long learning environments that will include ongoing awareness of social responsibility obligations. Lest we want to abdicate our social responsibility to a few college courses on business ethics, in a study Claudot, Alla, Ducrocq & Coudane (2007) conducted; they concluded that learners do not attribute any value to ethics being taught in lecture class settings. This is a real opportunity for IADIS. Can on-line education and training technologies; and social software succeed where lectures fail?

Our society understands that ethical behaviors are not skills attained overnight. Still and all, while the size of this task seems daunting and limitations are endless, success can be added one concept at a time. By integrating social responsibility obligations into the culture of life-long learning, only then can we expect successful outcomes. Our society and association only need to show incremental improvements for fostering ethical behaviors. What we learn from our experiences and research can be used by all those involved in life-long learning fields. Government, educators, and businesses can use this knowledge in programs that contribute to the cultures of life-long learning. In the end, maybe we will say "Life-long Learning and Social Responsibility Obligations" in the same sentence.

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