

Global Trends in Workplace Learning

Lung-Sheng Lee & Chun-Chin Lai

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Lung-Sheng Lee

Department of Business Management

National United University

Miaoli, Taiwan

e-mail: lungshenglee@gmail.com

Chun-Chin Lai

Department of Infant and Child Care

National Taipei University of Nursing and Health Sciences

Taipei, Taiwan

e-mail: cclai@ntunhs.edu.tw

Abstract-The paradigm of human resource development has shifted to workplace learning and performance. Workplace can be an organization, an office, a kitchen, a shop, a farm, a website, even a home. Workplace learning is a dynamic process to solve workplace problems through learning. An identification of global trends of workplace learning can help us to better connect with workplace learning stakeholders. Using a comprehensive search of 43 contemporary journal, magazine and newspaper articles, this paper reviews and synthesizes global trends in workplace learning in terms of the following five aspects: people/who, approach/how, time/when, place/where and thing/what. Consequently, five main trends are identified as follows: (1) Types of participants and facilitators are diversifying; (2) Emerging approach focus is practice-based systemic learning; (3) The flexibility of learning time has been increasing; (4) Learning by working and learning through systematic instruction at the workplace have been highly appraised; and (5) Workplace learning culture as well as practitioner's active engagement and motivation to learn have become key elements.

Keywords-human resource development (HRD), paradigm shift, work-based learning, workplace learning

1. INTRODUCTION

The American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) has continually expanded its professional emphasis from training to human resource development (HRD), and to workplace learning and performance (WLP) [1]. The workplace has become a centre of learning. Trends are developmental directions which indicate how a field is moving over time. The more workplace learning trend data we have, the more we may better connect with workplace learning stakeholders; however, what are the emerging trends of workplace learning? A systematic review and synthesis of recent academic and press articles may give an answer.

The two keywords, "workplace learning" and "trend", were used to search the full-text articles published between January 2008 and October 2011 and included in EBSCOhost, a research database serving premium content in every subject area, and totally obtained 43 articles related to workplace learning trends. The following five interweaving aspects were employed to identify trends in workplace learning which

are either explicit or implicit in the 43 articles: people/who, approach/how, time/when, place/where and thing/what.

II. FIVE MAIN TRENDS IDENTIFIED

A. Types of Participants and Facilitators Are Diversifying

Traditionally, the participants of workplace learning are mainly in-service and adult personnel in industries. However, it is found that the types of workplace learning participants and practitioners are diversifying. For example, higher education in the United Kingdom is shifting from supply-led to demand-led [2]. For another instance, one of the six multiple pathways leading to a variety of high-quality postsecondary options in the United States is experiential/work-based pathway, which emphasizes applied learning as well as youth development strategies and typically operates outside the traditional K-12 system [3]. The more the students at the upper- and post-secondary school levels have participated in work-based learning activities, the more school faculty and staff have involved in facilitating workplace learning. It is concerned that whether the current economic downturn has affected the tendencies. In Australia, there is significant evidence that the downturn has hit apprenticeship, although there appears to be a lesser effect on traineeship [4]. It also indicates that not only in-service but also pre-service employees at all levels are expected to access workplace learning [5].

In addition, due to decreasing birth rates and increasing longevity, a diverse older people in the workforce are becoming more common [6]. This also leads to the diversification of workplace learning participants. The diversification of workplace participants and facilitators makes this field broader and more complex and the collaboration between these diverse stakeholders should be continuously promoted.

B. Emerging Approach Focus Is Practice-based Systemic Learning

Workplace learning is a dynamic process to solve workplace problems through learning. It refers not only to formal, informal and non-formal learning in the workplace, but also to the learning embodied and embedded in contexts of work [7]. The Australian National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) defines workplace learning as "learning or training undertaken in the workplace, usually on the job, including on-the-job training under normal operational conditions, and on-site training, which is conducted away from the work process (e.g. in a training room)" [8].

According to Gruber, Mandl and Oberholzner's report in 2008 [9], the types of learning or training at the workplace most often applied in bigger companies are visits to expos/trade fairs, followed by courses/seminars/conferences by external trainers,

whereas, extensively less pervasive are job rotation, quality circles and self-learning activities as well as more modern work-related learning forms such as learning maps and islands, learning partnerships and platforms, networks and communities of practice, cognitive apprenticeship and blended learning. Smaller companies show a clear favorite for informal training activities such as in-house off-the-job training and on-the-job learning. To the authors' knowledge, there is no evidence supporting considerable changes to the above state.

In recent years, the emerging approach focus of workplace learning is practice-based systemic learning, in which learning is viewed as "the ongoing refinement of practices and emerging knowledge" [7] and is linked "the learner with their environment, particularly within a community of practice", like quality circles and new product development teams [10, 11]. That is to say, workplace learning approaches have tended toward being more experiential, contextual, transformative and collective.

C. The Flexibility of Learning Time Has Been Increasing

As stated by Garrick and Usher, the knowledge acquired from workplace learning is shifting to focus on problem-based know-how, which is characterized by learning outcomes that are performance- rather than time-and discipline-related [12]. More and more flexible working hours and work-at-home schemes also increase the flexibility of learning time. In addition, the use of e-learning through a variety of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has helped people learn at times previously impossible [13]. For example, Ketter pointed out that along with the challenges of the economic recession, social media tools exploded onto the scene of workplace learning [14]. Technology is being viewed as a method for acquiring knowledge [15]. The knowledge shift and technology applications lead that workplace learning is trending toward being implemented in more flexible time. However, it should be noted that resistance to or incapability of new technologies embedded learning is likely to continue, especially in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), for the foreseeable future [16]. Therefore, workplace learning should be considered as everyday job and can be accessed at anytime. In addition, new technologies can provide meaningful learning experiences for all workplace learners. Not only a technology-rich environment needs to be created in most workplaces but also all workplace practitioners as well as facilitators have to equip themselves with necessary technological literacy to benefit from technology enhanced learning.

D. Learning by Working and Learning through Systematic Instruction at the Workplace Have Been Highly Appraised

In terms of learning location, work related learning can be classified into the following three categories: (1) Learning tied to work--Location of learning and work are identical; (2) Learning connected to work--Work and learning are organized separately but sharing location and/or organization models; and (3) Learning oriented toward work--Learning takes place in centralized venues such as vocational education and training (VET) institutions [9] . The first category, identical location of learning and work, has become the midst of workplace learning and learning by working as well as learning through systematic instruction at the workplace are methods seen to be tied to work [9] . That is, the workplace has increasingly been recognized as an important learning environment in which work or experience is seen as a vital source of knowledge [17, 18].

When learning car driving, driving on a real road is far more authentic than on a driving school ground. Authentic learning argues that learners can effectively learn if they can learn what happens in the real world. In the three categories of work related learning stated above, the learning tied to work is the most authentic and should be kept up as top priority.

E. Workplace Learning Culture As Well As Practitioner's Active Engagement and Motivation to Learn Have Become Key Elements

Workplace can be an organization, an office, a kitchen, a shop, a farm, a website, even a home [7]. Williams identified the elements to be critical in the work-based (or workplace) learning process and concluded that for effective workplace learning practitioners need to take control of their own learning, receive support to critically reflect on their practice and be empowered to change their practice [18]. That is, the philosophical standpoints of workplace learning are trending toward necessitating a sound learning culture in the workplace, and a well support to facilitate practitioners' autonomous, self-motivated and self directed learning, as well as changes in their practice [18].

The above trends indicate that the ideal workplace learning situation argued by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) in 2003 has been echoed. The ideal workplace learning situation argued can be mainly depicted as follows: (1) Workplace learning is directed to increase innovative capacity and work capability in organizations; (2) Organizational culture supports and values workplace learning; (3) Workplace learning is an integral part of business and organizational strategic planning; (4) Workplace learning in all forms are valued and employed; and (5) Workplace learning is tailored to individuals; and (6) Networks, partnerships and supply chains are used to facilitate workplace learning [19] . In the authors' opinions, the ideal situation should be pursued and the trends echoed to the ideal situation will

continue.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Because the 43 articles reviewed in this paper are worldwide and some country- or area-specific trends were excluded, the trends in workplace learning identified in this paper are widespread. There is a saying, "Those who seize trends will prosper, those who resist trends shall peril." The strategies coping with the trends identified in this paper need to be considered in the development of workplace learning programs.

Generally speaking, employers have to know that employees work and learn better when they feel the organization values them. In most organizations, structured on-the-job training through shadowing, mentoring, coaching and job rotation should be increased. The evaluation of workplace learning effectiveness should be included in the performance appraisal system which can be linked to pay reviews.

To sum up, in order to effectively cope with emerging workplace learning trends, workplace practitioners have to become active learners to solve problems in their everyday practice and organizations have to value, plan and promote workplace learning. In addition, trends are moving out into the future, so we have to keep seizing the future trends in workplace learning.

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