

# Ecologies of Learning:

## Culture, Context and Outcomes of Workplace LES

by Juliet Merrifield PhD

*Adult educator and researcher Juliet Merrifield wrote "Ecologies of Learning: How Culture and Context Impact Outcomes of Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills" as a background paper for The Centre for Literacy's Summer Institute held in June 2012. Using evidence from research around the world, the report identifies and discusses contextual and cultural factors that influence workplace learning. It highlights three main contexts: that of the participant, the workplace and the social/economic/political environment. The report provides insight into the complexities of Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills (WLES), and suggests the concept of "workplace learning ecologies" as a possible way to frame the relationship among contextual factors.*

*Merrifield suggests that viewing the learner environment through a lens of social ecology – as a network of actors, environments, relationships and processes that influence outcomes – can bring greater understanding of the factors critical for success in any WLES program. As each situation is unique, there is no formula for success for WLES programs. Nevertheless, understanding the learning ecology of each workplace can play a decisive role in the outcomes of WLES programming.*

### CONTEXT AND CULTURE AND WLES OUTCOMES

As emphasized in Jay Derrick's recent paper (2012), there is a "need to connect workplace learning and essential skills to a larger domain of workplace learning in general." To do this, the contexts in which learning takes place, and the cultures of the actors and environments involved, should be taken into consideration. Although research on the direct effects of contexts and cultures on WLES outcomes is limited, there is a body of evidence from various disciplines and several countries on workplace training and general adult learning. Three main contexts have been identified: that of the participant, the workplace and the social/economic/political environment. Research findings for each are summarized below.

### INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANT CONTEXTS

For workers, many factors are involved in participation and in outcomes of workplace learning. Past life experiences, such as the level of education achieved by their parents and the quality of their prior learning experiences, have impact on their readiness to participate in WLES.

Factors in current life also have an impact. These include:

- *Age:* Rates of participation tend to decrease with advanced age (Roberts and Gowan, 2007; Pocock et al, 2011a, 2011b; Cameron et al, 2011; Hillage et al, 2006).
- *Gender:* Women are less likely to be offered workplace training as part of their jobs. There is an under-investment in training of female employees; factors influencing female participation include family obligations and the concentration of women in low-wage jobs that are least likely to offer training (Pocock et al, 2011b; Roberts and Gowan, 2007; Livingstone and Sawchuk, 2004 as quoted in Canadian Labour and Business Centre, 2005, p. 11).
- *Ethnicity and language:* Newly arrived immigrants face barriers to the labour market that may include language and discrimination; as a result, these workers may be concentrated in low-wage jobs with few training opportunities (Wilkinson, 2010; TLRP, 2008a, 2008b).
- *Social class:* Workers with a low skill level are less likely to be involved in workplace training (Parsons and Bynner, 2007). In unequal societies, work tends to reinforce social inequalities rather than reduce them (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010).
- *Demands of learners' lives:* Both women and men may experience specific barriers including time constraints, care-giving responsibilities, transport issues such as cost and availability, and work patterns of other family members.

## MOTIVATORS AND DEMOTIVATORS OF PARTICIPATION IN WORKPLACE TRAINING

### Motivators include (Evans et al, 2009):

- Curiosity
- Wanting to make up for missed earlier educational opportunities
- Self-improvement
- Wanting to help children with homework
- Career progression
- Better pay
- Job security

### Demotivators include (Keep, 2009):

- Cultural, attitudinal and dispositional barriers
- Lack of reward/support/encouragement for learning
- Lack of opportunity in the local labour market

Community and culture can either support or hinder learning. Community cultural values shape aspirations, career choices and attitudes towards education and training (summarized by Keep, 2009).

Individual work environments can also influence WLES outcomes. The education level of participants determines their work environment, such as type of position and opportunities to engage in literacy and numeracy practices. For example, managers or professionals have a higher rate of participation in workplace training than those in blue collar manual occupations (Roberts and Gowan, 2007). As well, employees with good qualifications are more likely to work in environments "rich" in literacy and numeracy practices than those in low-wage, low-skilled jobs (Schuller and Watson, 2009, p. 37; Keep and James, 2010).

Personal motivators and demotivators are shaped by cultural and workplace contexts, and are crucial influences on workplace learning. [See BOX] While job-specific motivators can positively influence learning, this type of motivation is reduced if there are changes to promotion goals or jobs, or in the face of unemployment (Warner and Vorhaus, 2008).

## WORKPLACE CONTEXTS

Several workplace factors can have an impact on WLES outcomes:

- *Nature of the labour market:* Workers in low-wage, low-skill jobs often have little opportunity to learn or practice literacy and numeracy skills. Low-paid jobs are associated with non-existent to low rates of return for higher skills or qualifications. U.K. research suggests that the proportion of low-paid jobs in 2010 was around 22% and was unlikely to fall over the next 10 years (Keep and James, 2010). In addition, contrary to the expectation that all jobs would eventually require higher literacy skills (Ontario Literacy Coalition, n.d.), routine and manual employment still represents a substantial portion of the labour market in developed countries.
- *Company learning culture:* Effective workplace learning cultures support the development of generic skills, as opposed to simple task-oriented learning, and encourage the application of learned skills to daily work (NCVER, 2003). The old adage "use it or lose it" applies to WLES programming; research has shown that outcomes are highest when participants are given the opportunity to use their new-found literacy and numeracy skills at work (Waite et al, 2011). Workplace cultures that view learning as "ad-hoc" episodes, or that restrict learning to specific tasks, skills or knowledge or a particular organizational need, run the risk of discouraging learning (TLRP, 2004).

### THE CENTRE FOR LITERACY

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## EFFECTIVE WORKPLACE LEARNING CULTURES TEND TO FOSTER:

- Open communication styles
  - Innovative systems
  - A broad role for workplace trainers
  - Informal learning built into organizational systems
  - A variety of opportunities for training and learning
- *Availability of support structures:* Unions, mentors, colleagues and sympathetic supervisors can encourage positive learning outcomes. The presence of company "champions" who support learning and have the decision-making or influencing power to ensure opportunities are provided has been identified as a factor of success for workplace learning (The Conference Board of Canada, 2005, 2009; Australian Industry Group, 2012; Vaughan et al, 2011). Union involvement has been found to have a positive impact on participation in workplace learning and subsequent outcomes (Centre for Workplace Skills, 2011; Warner and Vorhaus, 2008). In Canada, union membership appears to result in increased participation in employer-paid and formal courses (Canadian Labour and Business Centre, 2005).
  - *Company size:* Larger companies tend to offer more opportunities for training and longer-term programs than smaller ones (Waite et al, 2011).

## SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS

The changing nature of work, from increased global standardization to evolving governmental investment in education and training, places new and different demands on employers and employees. With increasing standardization and certification requirements in the international marketplace, employers are starting to offer more WLES training (Plett, 2007). Although the intent to improve employee literacy and numeracy skills is valid, these reasons for initiating WLES programs may lead to a narrow form of training that is focused on minimal compliance with regulatory requirements.

Governments have invested heavily in education over the past thirty years with a focus on skills and training (CIPD, 2005). Unfortunately, this investment has not transformed the work environments available to many workers (Keep and James, 2010). In fact, a phenomenon called "skills mismatch" has emerged in a number of countries, with up to one-third of workers reporting that they are over-skilled for their current job (OECD, 2011). In Canada, more workers tend to be under-employed in their jobs rather than under-qualified (Canadian Labour and Business Centre, 2005). In response, some governments are now focusing on skills' utilization in the workplace as opposed to simply training more workers (Warhurst and Findlay, 2012).

Policy plays a major role in WLES outcomes. Research suggests that key policy elements such as preferred program models, funding arrangements, assessment frameworks and reporting requirements have an impact.

- *Program models:* Brief, classroom-based programs (20–40 hours), typical in many countries, are too short to have an impact in terms of skills gains and productivity (TLRP, 2008b); although associated with increased confidence and social engagement, they are not long enough to provide literacy proficiency (NALA, 2011)
- *Funding:* Shifting funding arrangements, as a result of changes to WLES policies, destabilize workplace programs (Waite et al, 2011)
- *Assessment and evaluation requirements:* Mandatory pre- and post-testing required by funders may take away from valuable teaching time, and may not actually capture skills gains accurately (CODA, 2011)
- *Reporting and accountability requirements:* Excessive administrative tasks and paperwork may cut into class time and/or make running courses unprofitable (CODA, 2011; Waite et al, 2011)

The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) is currently doing research on some of these issues in several large-scale projects in Canada. Results from these projects promise to improve our understanding of the impact of context and culture on workplace learning.



## CONTEXTS AND CULTURES: USING A WORKPLACE LEARNING ECOLOGY FRAME

Using the concept of a learning ecology offers a way to frame and better understand the relationships among the various factors that influence WLES outcomes. A social ecology is the interplay between a complex dynamic of players (or actors), environment, relationships, and processes (Richardson, 2002; Waite et al, 2011). For learning, it is the real-world situation that influences outcomes.

In a workplace, the **actors** may be workers, managers, union leaders, trainers, policy-makers and partners. They may also be organizations, such as companies, unions, training providers, non-governmental organizations, governments, supply-chain players, customers, trade bodies and standards organizations.

The **environment** in which these actors operate includes changes in the nature of work, international standards for quality and health and safety, changes in styles of work organization and processes, and government policies. As each workplace is unique, the environmental influencers show the macro-level context for learning.

**Relationships** are critical. Research such as that done on successful workplace learning sites in New Zealand (Vaughan et al, 2011) consistently suggests that the complex interplay between different elements of the system shapes the outcomes. It is noteworthy that although institutions of power can create "strategies" to achieve a certain outcome, the actors in an ecology can also act, together or separately, and may use their own tactics to subvert these strategies to pursue their own goals. The connections among the different elements of the ecology – actors, the environment, relationships and processes – can determine the ultimate outcome of a given WLES program. Taking account of this, WLES programs must be flexible in responding to the different backgrounds and goals of employees, to the structures, cultures and needs of employers, and to unions and policy-makers.

The **processes** within a given ecology can either suppress or enhance learning. Processes that have been shown to enhance workplace learning include those that support putting learning into practice, that combine WLES programming with learning from experience and "on the job" learning, and that offer many and varied learning options. Cultivating a *culture of learning*, where people at all levels of the company are active in learning and where support structures and processes exist for informal and formal training, has been shown to be a successful strategy for engagement in literacy, language and numeracy in the workplace.

## HOW CAN A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEXTS AND CULTURES HELP US ACHIEVE SUCCESSFUL WLES OUTCOMES?

Research shows that context and culture play critical roles in workplace learning outcomes. By looking at workplaces as social, or learning, ecologies, it becomes easier to identify the unique contexts and cultures that drive the success or failure of WLES programs.

All workplaces are part of a learning ecology that has developed over time and that continues to evolve under new conditions. Workers, managers, unions, trainers and educators, policy-makers and other partners all create and recreate the ecology over time, interacting within wider social, economic and political environments, but the players have the capacity to act, and existing learning structures can be reworked, resisted or adopted. As such, WLES programming cannot be designed in isolation, using a pre-set structure. These programs operate within the existing workplace learning ecology, with actors, environment, relationships and processes all playing a role in program outcomes. Applying a "lens of social ecology" to the design of WLES interventions could help all actors understand these roles and achieve better outcomes.

Given the variability of circumstances and individuals in each workplace, there is no formula for success for WLES programs. To become part of effective learning ecologies, WLES programs, as Derrick and others have suggested, have to be integrated into the larger learning agendas of organizations, engaging workers, employers and other partners in the dynamics of the process.

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