

Why do managers learn best at work?

New vectors of dissent?

Adult customers for higher education have always had one option available - to travel beyond the workplace - and many do that every day of every week across the world. A second opportunity for self determination has been the private purchase of books / magazines and more recently radio, TV and internet-based courses. Their content and approaches can and have been conceived and delivered in a wide variety of contexts around the world. But the greatest contemporary vector for dissent has been workplace learning, led and funded by employers. The recent arrival of corporate universities is just the latest manifestation. Workplace learning has been high on the agenda of employers around the world for some 40 years or more. In the US, such provision receives more funding than the higher education sector itself. Many other countries have growth rates in workplace learning courses that provide further evidence that the state created and supported cartel is failing to meet needs or simply disinclined to do so.

One of the greatest paradoxes of a cartelized life is its certainty. Yet in several countries now, league tables of the universities are published that purport to guide customers in making choices. In practice, the validity for such tables lies in the disaggregation of those elements that impact on the learning of the individuals attending them rather than on the 'overall' rating that determines positioning in the league. Corporate universities have the ability to break through such conditioning by giving credibility to their own students, derived from the legitimacy and inherent motivation arising from the organizations where they work. The fact that 'our' organization espouses a pattern of learning is good enough for us. There is a 'hard' edge here too. Organizations are looking for a return on their investment in learning and a chance to help business employees to 'self-actualize'. Most managers have life and workplace experiences that must be interpreted and built upon for self actualization to occur, a significant outcome in its own right. So, in this context a pre-defined curriculum is little more than a reference point - even that it can be a dangerous imposition. Given these challenges, associates will view 'quality' as 'fitness for purpose' and any suggestion that an academic curriculum and control of inputs by hour or quantum can deliver quality is largely irrelevant. None of these determinants of effective learning at work are unknown to the educationalists working in mainstream institutions. They are daily taught and learnt, and regularly substantiated by a mountain of research evidence, so what are the design parameters that *really* matter to managers?

Clues for those who listen

Clue 1: "I learnt more in the bar than the classroom"

This feedback is widely found and acknowledged in adult education. It is normally treated in two ways. First, the faculty team is exhorted to teach better in competition with the bar. To make the classroom a more intriguing place. To vary the pace and the activities. Faculty who cannot score well on a rating scheme are replaced by others who can. Assuming classroom time is right, these steps are likely to improve effectiveness. The second approach is to seek to comprehend what goes on in the bar that the customer found so valuable, more valuable than the faculty member could muster in the classroom. It normally has little to do with the beers available on draught and almost everything to do with the pattern of ideas exchange. Research analyses show that there are two clear strands...the first is to compare one's own problems and approaches with those of others in similar roles but quite different contexts. The second is to learn from and receive guidance from individuals who have clear credibility in the field of knowledge in action rather than simply in the field of knowledge per se. Provided there is no pre-defined curriculum on the table that the provider is determined to convey, even test for recall, and that the agenda is to assist the individuals concerned to learn and to learn how to move their organization along as may be necessary, the focus can be straightforward. How can the classroom and the bar's activities find equi-marginal learning returns? How can the two locations be seen as a continuum rather than discrete? Only the customer can unite the two as the customer seeks to acquire and make use howsoever of the learning opportunity available.

Clue 2: "The pace of the course was too slow"

Practitioners arriving from a busy world of day to day working, for an educational experience, often wistfully recall the leisured pace of life as a student. The gaps between receiving an educational assignment and completing it were euphemistically termed 'reflection'. So presumably were the gaps between submitting an assignment and receiving feedback. In practice, many other extra curricula activities filled the time, many extremely active and few of them reflective. In the place of work these are measured as efficiencies. They are optimized against standards derived from careful analysis.

The phenomenon of reflection would be treasured but equally expected to be accountable. But more important than the contrast in work and life styles is the reality of the learning styles most likely to be encountered. Research has repeatedly and not surprisingly shown that faculty members in higher education prefer reflection and theorizing as their ways to learn. Unless they were so, they would find their tenures there insufferable. The typical practitioner is in practise because 'action' is the focal point. So for most practitioners, learning is more active and pragmatic than reflective and theoretical.

In a customer-oriented learning process one might expect a supplier to deploy learning approaches that are most compatible with those of the learner. If these are the precise opposite of those of the faculty member, the faculty member has to be capable of adjusting the approach. Failure to do so results in a faculty fail, not a student fail...unless of course the faculty member is judge and jury in the cause. When practitioners report the pace is too slow, the most typical observation from faculty is that the whole point of the course is to get them to reflect and not to spend their life shooting from the hip. The evidence that giving extra time to a busy person leads to reflection is not well substantiated. Rather they look for something else to do in lieu of reflection. They are all long conditioned to working in teams, and with support staffs and colleagues on whom they rely, rather than working solo. There may be a clue there perhaps to ways to achieve the required reflective processes. These might generate alternatives for thorough exploration before over hasty action. For example, is the mission to contradict the reality of the lives of the customers of higher education or to explore that reality and facilitate its more effective conduct, as well as articulating alternatives?

Clue 3: "Thank goodness that's over. I can forget about that now"

One of the more fascinating assignments to receive from practitioners in workplace learning situations is their answer to: 'What did you do with the things you learnt on your previous major learning event - Bachelor/ Master etc?' The great majority report that as far as they can discern much of what they learnt has been irrelevant for their life since and/or is now so out of date that they would be a danger if they used it. Now such reporting may or may not be bad news. After all, they certainly learnt how to learn when they needed to meet whatever testing requirements were presented to them. But the fascination from their feedback is of a different nature. It can form a powerful basis for inviting them as customers to articulate what they expect of the learning experience to come. Is such a level of subsequent irrelevance a good or a bad or an inevitable thing? Can they by looking forward to a better, more constructive learning experience? Would they rather learn in teams? How much of a normative structure do they want proposed and delivered by a knowing faculty, and how much do they wish to drive their learning agenda?

A case in point occurred at the launch of a corporate university during the late 1990s. Chastened by the confessed extent of their failure to deliver on their good implementational intentions, practitioners argued that it might be appropriate to substitute the implementation of a follow-on learning process for colleagues in their organization for a dissertation or thesis per se. In one now famous example, in the emergent field of virtual training and development, the practitioners literally put themselves through the learning experience to help themselves understand the experience others would soon have at their instigation. The evaluation of what happened and what should best be structured for the next cohorts, was itself the assignment or measure of what had been learnt and embedded in the culture for the future. There was no normative curriculum here. There was focused reflection. And there was much pragmatism in the learning. There was lots of action and pace.

Clue 4: "Saliency, just in time and right first time"

Perhaps the most subtle feedback that customer orientation affords is oblique. In the complex world of adult life, where lifelong and workplace learning are omnipresent but bustling for priority amongst myriad other opportunities, the final clue comes from the way practitioners behave, the way they prioritize their work and manage their time - longitudinally. Saliency - the extent to which an issue or concern is 'top of mind' as opposed to lurking - is a common enough phenomenon. To be effective in a learning context, saliency has to be accomplished and sustained. Yet as with any service there will always be moments of truth that can be used as critical triggers. What are these? How can they be educed, shared, managed, reinforced?

Truly, they are unlikely to be the seasons of a medieval academic calendar. They will have their own situationally derived determinism. For senior managers for instance, a linkage to corporate planning cycles within an organization can be powerful. The visioning and scenario writing phases, break out sessions and competitor impact evaluations all have powerful saliency already which can be harnessed.

The learning cycle has its own saliencies also. Start up sessions are of very great significance, setting expectations. The scheduling of sessions and assignments can be readily synchronized to suit the customer rather than imposed by the supplier. The venues can be rotated to reinforce the shared learning with colleagues within and beyond any given group and importantly to develop the social and self actualization dimensions of the process. And saliency is close to urgency. Life is busy for most. There are many deadlines to meet, and whilst many will take pride in beating deadlines by a day or so, few will have a work style that beats them by weeks. And furthermore, and perhaps most significantly of all, there is a requirement at such deadlines to be right first time. Yet right seldom means for the pragmatist what it means for the reflector.

For the pragmatist 'right' typically implies high level satisficing not polished perfection. Not for the pragmatists are concepts of 100 per cent service levels, which are known to be far more expensive to provide than any likely benefit arising. Not for the pragmatist tidying up after the event so the outcome looks fine for a casual future reader. If the extra mile is required, some far higher outcome than tidying up is required. Experience shows that publication of the substance is far more likely to drive and motivate the adult forward to greater learning, beyond the initial satisficing. Acceptance of such customer behaviours as the ones to which suppliers need to respond, transforms all patterns of logistical support and service. As time for the final assignments draws near, high levels of deviant behaviour appear. Each individual coming from their own context has wholly different pressures acting upon them. The goal is shared...to complete on time for graduation or presentation or for viva voce defences. But the complexity of the contexts is the reality. Customer services surely respond.

Democracy and the internet

As has already been stated, there can be little room for doubt that the internet offers customers who know how to make use of it a much wider array of choices in higher education. In terms of course access, only language is likely to bar admission and with current trends in translations, even this will pale. In terms of sheer knowledge access the arrival of online databases has both accorded universal access and at the same time, drastically minimized the expense incurred. Millions of articles, thousands of books by chapter are now available to individuals at any location with a phone line, a modem and a credit card. The wait of weeks or months, even if the existence of the item concerned was known, is a thing of the past. And so the new challenge is one of data overload. From dependency on library access and faculty guidance, the world of knowledge is available and we now seek guidance on how to make sense of it all. And the new intermediary will be what is termed info-mediation. It is a combination of imaginative search engines posited on well classified/ key worded original documents and structured databases of knowledge.

As such, the customer who has taken charge of the agenda for learning can readily seek and find what is known in that field and do so effectively and efficiently. The control of knowledge bases per se has been democratized. But more than that, the ability to join the knowledge game and publish has been greatly expanded too. The limiting processes of finite library space and budget, acquiring a narrow range of so called high quality journals, whose authors were drawn from the cartel within the field of knowledge concerned, has also been fractured if not yet broken. Ease of access through info-mediation and intranet systems will mean that far more individuals in lifelong and workplace learning will have ready access to knowledge. The expectation must be that despite their busy lives, they will make greater use of it. Adam Smith's classic dictum: 'sales are only limited by the extent of the market' will prevail.

The rise of corporate structures for learning

As is argued here that the age of lifelong learning is upon us not just as an imperative arising from the rate of change but also as the deliberate wish of the better educated generations we have in society today. The driving force in lifelong learning is not the acquisition of knowledge per se as it is amongst youngsters but rather self actualization of individuals of themselves and through the organizations where they work and live. That can scarcely be accomplished through a normative curriculum or through any model of higher education provision based on the 'faculty knows most - and best'. If our current institutions of higher education are to survive far into the 21st century they must reform apace. The advent of corporate universities and internet access has already shown the way. A new phenomenon of info-mediation replacing the professoriat of old is emerging. The state which currently sustains the anachronistic patterns by its legalized cartel will continue its drive for greater fee support as opposed to a free social service. The proposition that enterprises could and should institutionalize their continuous learning processes within their own corporate framework their own corporate framework has truly come of age.

The concept of a corporate university or corporate business school (CBS) is built on the assertion that 'managers learn best at work'. No amount of study of textbooks or theories or other people's case experiences written up as teaching aids can replace learning by doing provided that the doing is captured, reviewed and integrated into the enterprise's learnt systems. He argues that a learning organization is one where the feedback from actions taken and evaluated is continually used as the basis to update and amend the 'way we do things around here' being the systems and procedures and the cultural gestalt. A successful learning organization is one that learns at least as fast and preferably faster than change is making old systems and procedures obsolete.

To capture what is learnt from doing is the challenge. Intrapreneurs spend much time being sponsored or protected by a learning coach as they go around the edges of systems and procedures. *Entrepreneurs* have normally opted out of the enterprise to be able to proceed with changes and new ideas without the unending frustration of yesterday's systems and procedures. The CBS's purpose is to offer an official, institutionalized process framework which legitimizes the distillation of improved systems and procedures from action in the field of play, and also thinks and integrates the unthinkable. Systems for the enterprise belong to all who operate them, and arguably the CBS leader should be the senior operations management executive or director.

It can be seen that much of this line of argument is analogous with the ISO quality assurance approaches to systems and practices. Its difference is in seeing the CBS's activities as changing systems and procedures as a logical consequence of real action rather than a process of monitoring variances. The CBS as presented here is closer to the theories of double and treble-loop learning, but goes further. It comes to life when the top operations executives are right in the midst of the process. They already direct the action; now they are invited to direct the learning and its capture. As and when such an acceptance exists, the curriculum at the courses of learning within a CBS are wholly derived from the challenges facing the enterprise. Normative notions of what should be taught or learnt, such as a traditional business school would propound, are irrelevant. The curriculum arises from the challenges which are best expressed as questions. Faced with this uncertain situation (not a puzzle to which an answer is already known), what should we do next? There are no right answers, only workable action lines that can be resourced and tested and learnt from and used as the base for the next level of questioning.

What signs of progress?

There are two issues that have emerged as determinants of whether (or not) the corporate business school will flourish. The first, is continuity of leadership within any given enterprise. The second concerns the instruments and practices by which learning is captured for the enterprise and then incorporated into its culture, its learnt systems.

Continuity of leadership

Most large scale enterprises are complex, having a multitude of subcultures. And the affairs of the subcultures ebb and flow. Most significant leaders rely on new fashions or fads in management, addressing well tried and well tested needs, to act as a fillip for delivering sustained motivation and enthusiasm in their workplace. Many leadership roles are held for relatively short periods of time as a result of promotions, career changes within and outwith the enterprise, or in unfortunate times to downsizing or restructuring. In so far as the momentum and support for a CBS even when institutionalized is associated with a departing or departed leader, there is always the temptation for the incoming leader to make an impact by doing things their way. It is not necessarily inappropriate, one should add, for successful leadership that this should be so. To proceed with confidence in a leadership role is normally vital, and the sources of inner and outer confidence will seldom come from what one's predecessor did or championed. They will come from one's own distinctive other experiences. Accordingly any leadership change that seeks to do things differently as opposed to carry things forward in similar fashion, will put the CBS in jeopardy. And once it loses its leader's support it can be expected to face crisis.

Capturing and actioning the learning

The second critical issue has been the extent to which the managers directly participating in a CBS are able to articulate to colleagues and follow through on implementation of appropriate changes. As is shown elsewhere, the follow through on major single projects has been good, and the ROI on average spectacular. Yet paradoxically whilst this was happening the reported concerns of managers very much included a lack of support in the workplace for what they sought to accomplish. Fellow managers and bosses, not directly involved with the action learning protocols and in all events very busy with significant other tasks, did not identify as much as those who were participating would have hoped.

They were often apathetic and sometimes obstructive. Here the initial thrust which is still continued, is to involve fellow managers in the derivation of projects and issues for the curriculum, and to invite fellow associates to each location in turn to allow colleagues to meet with and understand the broader background. If management development and learning is well constructed, then a return on investment is achievable. The question at budget time each year has to be: How much? And over what timescale? If the learning is truly internalized, then management development is a good investment and it is good for the people who stay behind and who, by default, then get more scope to flex their muscles and brains. Furthermore, wise organizations will capture the learning by individuals into learnt systems.

Here are some typical 'snapshots' of what happens when learning is properly grounded in the challenges at work:

'My employer gave me full opportunity, responsibility and freedom to implement my projects.'

'My employer invested £1.2 million to fully implement the project. We gained a threefold return in the first twelve months.'

'Overheads fell by 18 million pounds per annum' '...by three million pounds per annum.'

'We stayed in business rather than making an undignified exit.'

Do managers leave their organizations? Well frankly no. Most stay put, relishing their new intellectual understanding and involvement in their enterprise. That is exactly what they report:

'We found the best solutions often came from those closest to the job. It was dangerous to have our own preconceived ideas or to think we knew best.'

'As an action learner I was able to gather information more easily than as a manager; others wanted to help me - even commiserated with me.'

'We gained confidence to talk to people at all levels in the enterprise.'

'In developing our projects we learned what the other parts of the company did, their purpose and methods of working.'

It can be seen in all these respects, that the organizational realities of the enterprise are increasingly influencing the learning structures and designs used. It might be discomforting for many in the mainstream educational world, yet the reality of the managers' workplace is that it is frequently unstable and there is no real alternative if one wishes to be relevant and work on the field of action, but to respond to the realities that are there.

Instability rules!

There are some who believe that unstable workplaces can simply be wished away in learning design. On the contrary, they are in fact themselves a major field for learning to which all too little attention has been given. Adult life is notoriously unstable for all, and the controlled or make believe world of childhood or adolescence is not available. If learning is to flourish providers have to accept that designs must be robust to the buffeting they will receive, and build in response and recovery tactics to handle it. One of those moments of truth is the moment of capture itself, of realization that something is well worth writing down and doing that very thing; or sharing in a conference or in a discussion forum. I am doing that very thing here and now, writing this article. In learning, we must frequently use 'assignments' to give the moment greater emphasis. We call for reports or discussion papers as much to clarify what the writer knows but has not distilled as for the benefit of the recipient. The more fragmented and disjointed adult life becomes the more we need such reference points or touchstones. But they must be well crafted to achieve the required outcomes.

Source: Accrediting Managers at Work in the 21st Century, Richard Teare & Gordon Prestoungrange, Prestoungrange University Press, 2004.