Can Employee Development Schemes Empower Workers?

Bruce Spencer, Athabasca University

Abstract

Employee Development Schemes (EDS) refer to educational opportunities partially funded by employers that allow employees to choose to study non-vocational subjects including liberal and leisure related topics. The question explored here is can EDS empower workers or are they more accurately represented as just an extension of employer control – disempowering rather than empowering? This paper will argue that an understanding of the schemes (as they exist in the UK) as limited, essentially employer determined learning for work (the view expressed by Livingstone and Sawchuk, 2004) is to miss the potential of the more radical union negotiated, employee determined EDS. While these schemes are not empowering in the collective, solidarity sense that is at times achievable via labour education programs they can provide a reawakening in individual learning that can lead to more solidarity learning other union education and to independent actions not just to greater employer control.

Introduction

The paper is based on some limited empirical investigation and literature search and some thinking about what model or theoretical understanding best describes Employee Development Schemes. The paper represents the first phase of an ongoing research interest in understanding EDS and their applicability to other countries particularly Canada. This paper will review what kinds of employee development schemes (sometimes referred to as employee development assistance programs, EDAP) are being supported by organizations in other countries (particularly the UK). It will then reconsider the meanings of “empowerment” and discuss how unions can influence broader-based EDS and develop union controlled or union influenced workplace learning.

Employee development schemes that encourage and fund workers to undertake forms of non-vocational adult education of their own choosing have taken root in Britain. The evidence to date suggests that these progressive EDS are benefiting workers in terms of encouraging learning activities (and benefiting employers in terms of worker confidence to take on new responsibilities). While the public policy framework has been an important factor it has arguably been less important than key initiatives undertaken by unions and employers in promoting these schemes. To date most progress on EDS appears to have been spearheaded by Ford and the Ford recognized unions in the private sector and by UNISON (the largest UK public sector union) in the public sector.

Employee development is seen increasingly as an important part of the new human resource management (HRM) – if organizations are to succeed, it is argued, they need to become “learning organizations” and make better use of their “most valuable asset,” human resources, those resources need to be developed via workplace learning, training and education. Although this new HRM rhetoric finds ready acceptance with many CEOs it’s not at all clear if there is a genuine interest in broadly based employee development
or general agreement on what kinds of employee development should be supported and in particular if non-work related employee development is justified. (It should also be remembered that many companies who have claimed the “learning organization” tag are also the first to sack workers – “the most valuable asset” – when market conditions are tough or shareholder interests demand it.)

This paper is being written from a Canadian perspective, the desire to create a knowledgeable workforce has driven a number of recent Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) policies and Canadian company and union initiatives. Developments in other English speaking countries with similar social and economic frameworks have been of interest to Canadian policy makers. Initiatives in Britain, the European Union, Australia and New Zealand around issues of training, national vocational qualification schemes, laddering of skills and general aspects of human resource development have generally been in advance of those in Canada although a number of initiatives by HRDC have promise and can now be viewed as parallel to these developments. Given this background and perspective it is critical to discover the factors underlying developments in Britain (including European Union membership) and to understand the applicability of EDS to countries such as Canada.

The union view of EDS*

From a union perspective an EDS is essentially a fund that fully or partially pays the fees of employees who want to take part in education/learning that's not directly job related. In some schemes paid time off work may also be available. The schemes can fund a range of personal, academic or leisure interests including hobbies or sport, opportunities to improve basic skills, or the pursuit of mainstream academic qualifications including college diplomas and university degrees. EDS are seen as helping employees develop their careers or personal interests; the focus may be on broadening workers transferable skills or simply encouraging employees to return to learning or develop a learning habit. The union's involvement in negotiating, establishing and monitoring an EDS is considered essential to achieving these broad goals and meeting union members’ learning needs.

The Ford scheme known as the Ford Employee Development and Assistance Programme (Ford EDAP) was set up in 1987 and is generally regarded as the forerunner of private employer EDS. It offers employees the range of personal education and training (non-vocational employee development) opportunities, discussed above, outside working hours. Many activities are offered onsite to fit around shift patterns and have included car maintenance, languages and keyboard skills but workers can also go offsite and study a range of adult education programs offered in the community. A number of other companies have devised their own EDS; these EDS can be grouped into three different categories:

-- Single schemes: where one organisation -- be it a company, or industry, or industry training body -- develops its own scheme for its own group of workers (in a company, geographical area, or industry). These borrow from Ford EDAP.
-- **Co-ordinated schemes**: where several companies work together to set up a co-managed scheme to provide opportunities for all their employees.

-- **Multi-schemes**: where one body - usually the local Learning and Skills Council - helps smaller organisations design their own schemes, and provide them with support perhaps linking them to other small employers’ schemes: networked more than co-ordinated.

The main features of EDS include: access to education and training - not usually job-related; workplace-based (or nearby) provision often delivered by a local college or other educational/training institution; voluntary participation – although participation is encouraged and programs and courses are promoted; learning normally takes place outside of working hours in the workers’ own time; employers fund the cost of the learning within an agreed or negotiated range, sometimes this will be expressed as a yearly entitlement and can typically vary between as low as £50 or as high as £350 per employee.

Those managing the EDS may negotiate a number of places on a college course or may refund fees for those workers who meet attendance criteria. Some larger employers have developed “learning centres” at the workplace that offer EDS programs alongside the more usual workplace vocational training programs – thus providing a range of opportunities for vocational and personal development.

The benefits for union members include free or reduced cost courses (learning opportunities) that take in the more familiar onsite or close to the workplace locations and are scheduled at times that fit around working hours (including shift patterns). The EDS can offer a “second chance” for members who may have missed out on previous school or college or community learning opportunities. EDS is also seen by unions as offering their members a chance to gain additional, more diverse transferable skills that can offer greater job security and improved career prospects in the “global knowledge economy marketplace.” They also increase self-confidence, morale and motivation which can pay off not only at work (and therefore for the employer) but also in increased union activity.

Evidence to date shows that employers who support non-vocational learning can benefit from their modest support for EDS; the learning spills over into increased participation in workplace training which together with the EDS can provide a more adaptable and skilled workforce. The boost in self-confidence, morale and motivation noted above can result in a more positive attitude to training and learning and to a greater commitment to work resulting in lower turnover and absenteeism. The first major study supporting these arguments was conducted on Ford EDAP (Beattie, 1997) -- it should be noted however that these studies are generally looking to encourage EDS and therefore can be expected to accentuate the positives. The concrete benefits to employers do seem to be real but may also be over-stated. In Beattie’s study it was found that employees felt better about their work and their employer and returned from their educational activities with greater loyalty and respect for the organization. With the push from EDAP (42% of manual workers took advantage of EDAP) worker involvement in adult education leapt to more than three times the national average for this socio-economic group of adults, a clear
benefit for the workers involved. Research has suggested that private sector EDS covers 20% of the private sector workforce (Berry-Loud, Rowe, & Parsons 2001) initially I had thought of this as a low number but on reflection this is a significant coverage for schemes that increase payroll costs but are not at first glance financially beneficial to employers. The data provided in this paragraph, particularly Beattie’s study may be interpreted as lending support to the view that EDS operates as a sophisticated and subtle extension of employer control but it also points to greater employee confidence and learning that could result in more independent and union actions by employees.

Union action on EDS

Most of the major UK unions have become involved with EDS to a greater or lesser extent, they seek to be a participant from the outset in establishing workplace schemes and regard the most successful as those jointly managed by trade unions and employers. They argue for a commitment to the EDS by senior management and for the learning opportunities to be focussed on what members want not on business priorities. Unions are well aware of the educational biases favouring the most privileged and therefore argue for the entire workforce to have access to the EDS with a particular emphasis on access for the less privileged. Unions recognize that members will need advice and guidance as to what is available and how to take advantage of the opportunities, all this and promotion too need to be included within the scheme. In some cases promotion is shared with the new union learning representatives (Forrester, 2002; 2004).

The leading example of union action on learning is Britain's UNISON Open College concept, which includes labour education, basic skills, return to learn, recognition of prior learning and non-vocational and vocational training opportunities for all union members. This concept connects with members’ immediate needs for education and learning opportunities and in time feeds into strengthening union activity and presence in society. It can also provide critical approaches to current issues, something which is lacking from more homogenized adult education and training. UNISON has recognized the failure of much basic adult education to reach workers in the lower socio-economic strata and stepped in with a Return to Learn (R2L) program that provides opportunities for workers to become better educated. Further, they have laddered that introductory course up through their Open College to other programs, even to the attainment of full degrees. It takes the “learning society” rhetoric seriously and accesses employer and state funding and claims time-off work for its members. The R2L courses are based on UNISON/ Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) developed educational material. Its link with the WEA for tutoring of R2L assures an adult education focus, with materials centred on collective understandings. This educational initiative is benefiting the members and the union, as a result of increased confidence and understanding gained through the courses members are volunteering for union representative positions and arguing for policies to benefit their local membership (Kennedy, 1995).

Other unions (such as AMICUS, a largely white-collar and technical amalgamated union) have also developed these more comprehensive programs, linking basic union education to graduate courses for union members focussed on critical social science perspectives; these link the union college (Whitehall) to university programs at the University of
Leeds. While these integrated programs may be considered as going beyond what is normally considered as EDS the UNISON and AMICUS-type programs has set a benchmark for good practice in the public and unionized private sectors and has acted as a spur to employers to cooperate in establishing broader-based EDS. The way this works is that UNISON having taken the initiative in developing the R2L materials present the proposal for a program of courses to employers, including requesting employer funding and time off for members (and or shift adjustments) to make it possible. R2L has become one option within a range of courses offered within public sector EDS and perhaps the most significant for workers from lower socio-economic groups. UNISON’s Open College concept has also served as a key example of what unions can achieve in a hostile environment; it was able to sell itself as a major component of the government desired “learning society” and fed into the argument for union learning representatives to be recognized in every unionized workplace. Needless to say the UNISON initiative has also served as a good example for unions in the UK and abroad (for example speakers from UNISON have addressed a number of union gatherings in Canada).

A number of reports have been produced in the UK documenting aspects of EDS (Berry-Loud, et al, 2001; Lee, 1999; Parson, et al, 1998). Two internal assessments, one from the University of Glasgow (Maclachlan, 1999) and the other from the University of Leeds, (School of Continuing Education, 2001) of the efficacy of EDS at their institutions were influenced by the presence of university adult educators who were able to work closely with on-site unions.

**Theoretical approaches to workplace relations, learning and empowerment**

A theoretical approach to understanding workplace relations that makes most sense in English-speaking liberal democracies can be described as pluralist (following Clegg; Flanders, the Oxford School); from this perspective issues of power, authority, ownership and control need to be recognized within the workplace (radical pluralists such as Fox would give them more weight and critical writers such as Hyman even more). The framework also recognizes a more sophisticated approach is needed to such issues as “team building,” “employee involvement,” “empowerment,” and other ingredients of the “learning organization” rhetoric – recognizing different interests means that employers need to give up some control if employees are to gain real empowerment, all initiatives cannot be depicted as “win-win.” From this perspective human resource development needs to be more holistic and less focused on narrow vocational training. This theoretical approach can also be viewed as an “adult education” framework (following Lindeman in the US and the “Great Tradition” in the UK and Australia – with for example a focus on liberal humane studies, reflective citizenship and social purpose) rather than a “human resource management” framework (essentially unitarist such as that assumed by Senge and by most other workplace learning commentators).

Empowerment has become a readily used descriptor of the impact of workplace learning and new human resource management practices – the learning organization is said to *empower* workers to take control of their own learning and to improve their contribution to company performance. While this use of the term empowerment is interesting it needs
to be analyzed more closely. It is clear the term is often being used to mask the basic corporate desire to extract more surplus labour from each employee (this analysis is similar to many others see for example Argyris, 1998). This may not be exceptional in itself but it is important to note that it does not result in any increase in power to the workers, in that sense to describe this process as practiced in many learning organizations as empowering is a misleading; as Wilkinson has commented based on his study of the hospitality sector “empowerment as currently practiced is less empowering than employee participation of earlier times” (1998, p. 49).

While it may be useful to borrow Foucault’s notions of dispersed power and to think about power in the sense of what resources individuals have and can bring to bear, and that power is not a zero-sum game; power is very important in the work-world. Hierarchy, authority and control pervade most workplaces and in the private sector key decisions are made by well-paid and privileged individuals acting on their own interests and those of shareholders. Under those circumstances empowerment requires more than a learning opportunity. Workers need considerable resources to challenge such a concentration of power; unionization needs to be allied to militant union action, employers need to sacrifice substantial areas of control if workers are to be empowered, and eventually workers need to be beneficiaries of any material gains made. In the context of this paper it can be argued that union influenced EDS can make small steps towards worker empowerment in a general sense but in terms of meaningful co-management of the work-space or of society EDS have to be part of a more comprehensive union plan for democratization of work and society.

Unions may represent a minority of workers in Canada (approximately 30% of the workforce is unionized) as they now do in other similar English speaking societies but their presence in the public sector and large private workplaces offers an important leverage for new ideas around work and learning. Nor should the important role of adult educators be overlooked; the opportunity for employees (manual workers and support staff) to take advantage of EDS in British higher educational institutions owes a great deal to the advocacy of adult educators in those institutions (in addition to the unions and progressive human resource staff and WEA tutors in R2L). Canadian unions and adult educators – and others from around the world – should take note.

Conclusions

How should we then understand these schemes? They are clearly more than “training” – vocationally linked and limited by employer interests – but are best described as “adult education” in the traditional sense as non-credential, non-vocational education/learning. The majority of EDS cannot be described as “social purpose” adult learning or as “empowering” in themselves and most of the schemes fall a long way short of the committed education associated with many global labour education programs and in particular membership education spearheaded by the Canadian Autoworkers negotiated paid educational leave program (Spencer, 1994; 2002a). The case supporting EDS may be argued in terms of the advantages to both employers and workers but it is a mistake to argue that it is best depicted as “learning for and within capitalism” concerned with the
“problem of credentializing learning” (Livingstone and Sawchuk, 2004, p.281) for in the case of many union negotiated and provided schemes EDS is linked to all kinds of non-credential (i.e. non-formal) learning opportunities and in some cases to collective union education provision that is intended to be empowering. Also adult educators supporting EDS such as Maclachlan and Forrester are not naive and are aware that workplace learning misused can lead to increased workplace managerial control (Spencer, 2002b). While these schemes are not empowering in the collective, solidarity sense that is at times achievable via labour education programs they can provide a reawakening in individual learning that can lead to and be linked to more solidarity learning, other union education, and to independent and union actions not just to greater employer control.

* The notes in this section are based on those available on the UK union AMICUS – MSF section’s website http://www.msf.org.uk/whitehall

References


