Paradigm Shift: The Emergence of Formal Distributed Learning Graduate Programs in Canada

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ABSTRACT:

Workplace learners in a knowledge-based society are demanding access to non-traditional formal graduate learning opportunities in universities. Three Canadian case studies are reviewed, new directions are identified, followed by three issues for consideration in workplace learning.

The Changing Workplace

A defining factor of the new millennium is the emphasis on continuous change and the need for workers to become change-agents within their workplaces. Moreover, workers are asked to bring to their organizations a set of flexible, knowledgeable "people-oriented" capabilities that are amiable to adaptation as situations shift, change, evolve and transform. Matthews & Candy (1999) indicate just how this transformation is effecting the workplace environment:

the rapid rate of change in most occupational areas, the explosion of knowledge in many fields, the increasingly widespread impact of technology, and the issue of both geographic and occupational mobility mean that few if any can escape the need for continuing work-based learning.

(p.49)

Zuboff (1988) argues that learning is no longer a separate activity that occurs either before one enters the workplace or in remote classroom settings, but rather "the effective practitioner today is one who actively seeks out opportunities for new learning" (Matthews & Candy, 1999, p.50) on a regular basis.

A segment of workplace learners- who are often directors, managers, co-ordinators and mid-career professionals - are motivated to enhance capabilities by seeking out further formal graduate learning opportunities. Knapper & Cropley (1991) identify four characteristics of lifelong learners comparable to those of adults seeking further opportunities while employed within their workplace environment. These adults are;

- strongly aware of the relationship between learning and real-life (which includes the work environment);
- aware of the ongoing need for lifelong learning (especially in rapidly changing work environments);
- highly motivated to carry on learning (in workplace environments);
- able to demonstrate a self-concept favourable to lifelong learning (particularly in the workplace)

Further, workplace learners share many of the characteristics of "lifelong learners" described by Knapper & Cropley (1991). These include the ability to:

- see learning as a valuable and activity leading to worthwhile in their own lives;
- set personal objectives in a realistic way;
- use and apply knowledge already possessed;
• evaluate one's own learning effectively;
• locate appropriate information;
• use different learning strategies in different settings;
• employ learning aids such as computers or the media; and
• apply and interpret information from different subject areas.

(p. 45)

These characteristics are essential for both continuous learning and for further formal learning opportunities in graduate education programs. Links have long been established between workplaces and undergraduate schooling (e.g., co-operative education programs, work-study programs), and workplace learners are seeking graduate learning opportunities to meet the changes in the workplace.

These non-traditional formal academic opportunities at both the master and doctoral levels are designed to attract learners with different needs, serve unique expectations and demands, and use alternative course delivery methods. While under the auspices of Graduate Studies, these opportunities denote broader and more unique models of delivery than traditional programs, but are consistent with rigorous academic frameworks prescribed by graduate faculties. These programs are attractive to the burgeoning workplace learning field and offer the same academic credentials and standards as traditional graduate education degrees.

…but to win this business, these institutions have to change some of their ways. New students will be there not to get a degree but to learn. The educational institution should not put bureaucratic roadblocks in their way…Decisions to admit should be based on the work record, experience, needs and the goals of the student. Educational institutions should also adapt their offerings to the changing needs of these mature students. If corporations, because of demographic and technical change, are placing more emphasis on teamwork and less on leadership, then courses on teamwork should be substituted for courses on leadership.

(Foot & Stoffan, 1996, p. 67)

Formal Graduate Learning Programs

Educational Change

A paradigm shift to individual, flexible and new formal graduate learning opportunities has developed to enable learners to participate in learning anywhere, at anytime, and in any location. In setting high standards, the importance of excellent cross-departmental relationships is critical to the success, maintenance (or failure) of these new program initiatives. Knapper & Cropley (1991) argue that educational change in academic programs occurs with the involvement of strategic and innovative faculty within the university community. Ideally, faculty should be supported and encouraged throughout the entire change process from development, pilot and evaluation stages to ensure innovations occur in an effective, lasting and transforming way. Little (1983) recommends efforts that support these initiatives by identifying staff who are likely – and able – to act as educational entrepreneurs; providing support to those who can lead innovation effectively; and encouraging those interested in promoting change to work directly with learners and others committed to innovative change.

The following case studies are indicative of three formal graduate learning opportunities that incorporate the talents, skills and strategic directions discussed in this paper. All programs are offered at the Master's level, but defy traditional degrees as they represent non-traditional, "out-of-the-box" thinking about the meaning of knowledge, the way in which it is delivered, and the way in which learning is addressed with adult learners. All cases reviewed are Canadian-based, stretching from eastern to western Canada with each housed outside traditional
university departments. These varied locations are incubators of innovation for workplace learning in today’s changing society. Faculty members are drawn from both traditional and non-traditional academic backgrounds, but each is dedicated to the philosophy of the importance and value of lifelong learners in our society. Similarly, learners admitted to the programs are at once fascinating, mature, thoughtful individuals offering a wealth of new challenges and benefits to each other, the faculty, the graduate program, and to society. Most of all, they continual to inspire us with a desire to communicate, relate and work with others.

Case Studies

Master in distance education (MDE). Offered by Athabasca University, the program is designed for part-time adult learners committed to learning about the theoretical, practical, cultural, social and pedagogical issues in the burgeoning distance education field. Developed and delivered through the Centre of Distance Education, this program continues to be a pioneer in enabling adult learners to experience and understand how on-line learning mediums can be used as an alternative and highly effective learning tool across diverse workplaces.

Athabasca University offers comprehensive learner support services which include, but are not limited to, technical assistance offered on a 24 hours a day basis, library services designed exclusively for on-line learners, administration and registration services which operate efficiently while being professional, courteous and responsive to the public. The faculty maintains a learner-centered philosophy, bringing a wealth of experience to the program and are creative problem-solvers in responding to learner needs. In addition to core faculty, additional sessional faculty with doctoral qualifications can be contracted with a written obligation to respond to on-line learners within 24 to 48 hours. The program continues to be extremely successful and enables learners to continue with their work while completing the graduate degree.

Master of information technology education program (MITE). Offered by Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia this Program was developed and jointly offered in 1998 by the Office of Graduate Studies, Dalhousie University, Henson College serving as the faculty outreach provider for Dalhousie University, and the Institute of Information Technology (ITI), a private North American corporation responsible for intensive computer software training for adult learners. This Master’s degree attracts adult learners from teaching and other workplace backgrounds interested in developing further computer skill bases to work within information technology workplaces in Canada or beyond. All learners are required to successfully complete modules in computer languages and to do so in a way that emphasizes the facilitation of new information to others within the online environment. Each learner must prove their technical expertise in converting a face-to-face instructional segment to a distributed learning module in preparation for facilitation roles in the workplace.

The program attracts many adults from Atlantic Canada and has prepared many for workplace transfers to American corporate training centres upon graduation. As with other Master’s programs reviewed in this paper, tuition fees are steep, but learners have been successful in receiving support from existing or new workplace employers upon successful completion of the program.

Master of continuing education program (MCE). Offered since 1996 at the University of Calgary, this program offers specializations in workplace learning or leadership and development. While a two year program is available to learners on a full-time basis, most chose to complete the requirements on a part-time basis. The uniqueness of this program is its design and delivery format. It is the only graduate program in Canada that offers a blended program design consisting of intensive face-to-face(F2F) institutes held in first and second years, with fall and winter academic terms offering computer-mediated distributed communication. This dual approach enables learners to experience both worlds and to build a strong sense of community amongst learners throughout the program. Learners may continue to work at their workplaces for the duration of the program.

The program is progressive and an internal review was completed (Wiesenberg, 1998, Bratton, 1999) outlining areas of strength and future development. It was repeatedly noted that the strength of the program is the ability to link personal development with workplace and organizational development and the ability to be flexible, resourceful and supportive with learners.
Summary.

While each case study was established to meet different market conditions, the effect has been to create formalized graduate learning opportunities meeting specialized needs of lifelong workplace learners. The MDE offers new knowledge in distributed learning technologies within current workplace learners while the MITE program offers an intensive, non-traditional method for adults needing advanced training for newer workplace environments. The program replicates many of the features used in information technology workplaces and develops the skill and problem-based abilities of educated knowledge-based workers. Finally, the MCE program uses the workplace as the focus for learning about the new workplace environment and the way in which challenges can be addressed in today’s world.

New Directions for Formal Graduate Learning Programs

These case studies provide a snapshot of new directions in formalized learning opportunities that can be accomplished when strategic, innovative and knowledgeable faculty and decision-makers are encouraged to promote change with others. The new directions for development in workplace learning are identified below based on one faculty member’s experience in teaching within each of these programs.

Personal Growth & Development.

Adult education principles have been successfully used with faculties of education for years, and they are employed in all of these programs designed for personal growth and development with lifelong long learners in the workplace. Used in conjunction with various learning and teaching strategies, they provide workplace learners with opportunities to:

- explore their own assumptions of learning through teaching, dialogue, personal and critical reflection;
- promote past knowledge with new learning experiences;
- integrate theory with practice and vice versa;
- foster the development of deep learning processes and skills;
- internalizing a positive sense of self-worth and constructive initiative; and
- offer opportunities to demonstrate new and constructive learning with others.

Mezirow (1990) and Marsick (1990) refer to this type of learning as critical reflection in which learners are encouraged to re-evaluate their frames of reference used to understand an experience. This process can lead to an examination of learning from additional perspectives that may not have been previously questioned. This “unexpected surprise” (Hunt, 1987) phenomena may create profound insight that enables skilled facilitators the opportunity to channel these personal issues into the context and content of the learning experience.

These types of transformative learning experiences can be utilized effectively in graduate programs by inviting, expressing, encouraging, questioning and challenging assumptions to reflect and develop new ways of understanding workplaces. This informs the people, processes and the organizational structures within these environments.
Openness to New Learning Approaches.

The openness to pursue new learning opportunities drawn from training and development, the human resource field, and educational settings has radically transformed the learning environments for these three case studies. A partial list of these new approaches to learning include:

- learning sessions, activities and experiences held outside traditional university environments;
- use of personal laptops for personal, learning and research purposes;
- networking systems to enable learners to communicate with each other electronically at any time;
- extensive use of teams requiring adults to learn how to work and function within collaborative environments;
- personal and group presentations on specific topics;
- utilization of negotiation, problem-solving, decision-making and helping skills;
- formal and informal instruction and consultation times with facilitators;
- self-directed learning activities within the learning environment;
- personal discussions with faculty in personal, telephone, e-mail and/or fax communication modes;
- trust, respect and supportive "ways of knowing" between learners and facilitators;
- extensive formative feedback given to learners throughout the learning time; and the
- use of assignments/projects for integration, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluative inquiry applied to various workplace settings.

The case studies offer new ways of working, learning and communicating together in dyads, triads and/or larger groups that emphasizes learner partnership approaches. These mirror the developments within the collaborative teaching and learning field (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). This type of learning relies on a deeper approach to learning (Ramsden, 1988), and transcends traditional transmission styles used all too frequently in the past.

Ownership of Change & Innovation.

The learners in these three case studies have the knowledge, abilities, and desire to be change-agents within workplace environments. Graduates of the MDE Program at Athabasca develop the breadth and depth necessary to serve as humane specialists in distributed learning technology in workplace environments. Throughout the program they develop a critical understanding of the design, technology, gender, social and cultural factors underlying the use of this new medium for learning environments. The MCE Program at the University of Calgary, on the other hand, is dedicated to the development of change-agents in workplace learning. This is designed to implement change and innovation in the corporate, private, public or not-for-profit settings. Similarly, the MITE Program at Dalhousie offers the technological expertise with facilitator training to work within information technology workplace environments in Canada and internationally.

Change and innovation require more than technical adeptness. They call on strategic thinking skills, networking abilities and information gathering skills -- or the qualities of continuous lifelong learners -- to seek new work opportunities in the future. If the cycle of the spiral career pattern is to be the future career pattern of workplace learners (Foot & Stoffman, 1996), then graduates from these formal graduate programs may well have the opportunity to shift careers to educational fields to prepare future generations of workplace learners for their
disciplines. If success breeds success (as it often does), then future graduate programs will follow in these footsteps.

Innovative Linkages with Others.

Each of the case studies has wide linkages within and outside universities. As the only dedicated distance education university in Canada, the MDE program has extensive linkages within Canada and abroad which are crucial and collegial as they have developed over the years. The MITE Program, on the other hand, is a joint business partnership with the private and financial profitable Information Technology Institute (ITI), Henson College, and the Office of Graduate Studies which serves the academic needs for Dalhousie, the Province of Nova Scotia and beyond. Like traditional graduate programs, the MCE program at University of Calgary, has enjoyed an extremely effective and productive relationship over the years with the Faculty of Graduate Studies and community advisory members.

Alumni are extremely loyal and this area is ripe for expanded growth for all programs. The importance and need to encourage the establishment of active alumni associations concentrating on personal and workplace themes can not be overemphasized. Moreover, the future of these workplace programs can be solidified, enriched and provide an excellent network structure to invite further linkages and innovations between workplaces and academic programs.

These linkages are particularly crucial for those programs which are incubators for new graduate and formal workplace learning opportunities within the traditional university environment. One key to expansion is to develop program initiatives with other Canadian partners, and perhaps internationally. Canada is a leader in knowledge-based industries, and these corporate, private, and public workplaces hold greater promise of further workplace programs.

Summary

Four opportunities for expansion were identified from the three case studies presented. These emphasize the importance of personal growth and development, new learning opportunities, ownership and innovation and initiation of linkages with others. The field of graduate workplace learning will expand and become increasingly competitive, and begs the question, “Where do we go from here?”

Emergence of Theory and Research in Workplace Learning

While theoretical foundations describe, inform the practice and provide the means to guide future developments, concepts are the “building blocks” of a theory and evolve from the ideas generated from direct experience. If we are to build logical and predictive theories for workplace learning, then we can begin the process of concept-building by identifying some of the key assumptions emerging from the case studies presented. This grounded theoretical approach provides mechanisms for the development of approaches which are inclusive, generalize able and interdisciplinary in nature. The paper addresses three components – knowledge in the workplace, learners as agents of change in the workplace, and the learning environment for workplace learners. Each is explored from the perspective of new directions for workplace learning theory and research.

Assumptions About Knowledge in the Workplace.

Workplace learners are enculturated to learn what knowledge to share with others (e.g., training opportunities, corporate procedures, hours of employment, expectations about work levels, overtime, social activities), who to share this knowledge with (e.g., work peers, middle, senior levels, work colleagues), when to share this knowledge (e.g., rarely, occasionally, frequently) and where to share knowledge (e.g., in the boardroom, on the golf course, on the telephone etc.).

This practical issue relates to underlying assumptions about knowledge in workplace environments. This includes:
• Workplace knowledge may be considered as a public or private domain;
• Specific knowledge is developed and maintained in workplace environments;
• Different types of knowledge (i.e., procedural, process, contextual, content-specific, informal knowledge) are used for varying purposes in workplace environments;
• Knowledge is selected by workers; some is more applicable to certain situations than others;
• Workers are enculturated to know which knowledge can be used or applied and which cannot be applied to situations; and
• Knowledge is rated as high or low by the worker depending on its utility to the worker.

Each of these knowledge assumptions requires a deeper analysis than this paper allows presently, but it is clear that these assumptions influence a learner's decision to undertake further graduate programs. For example, the learner must decide if the workplace has a shared and open knowledge culture that makes investing in new workplace learning opportunities worthwhile, and why or why not? Learners privately evaluate whether this situation likely to change in the future? What is needed to make this happen? What changes need to be encouraged? Who will be the change-agents promoting this change? What kind of resistance to change is likely to occur? Whether a worker decides to pursue further learning may depend on the answers given to these personal knowledge assessments of work.

This personal and professional decision-making processes offers exciting and daunting experiences. On one hand, it provides the opportunity to explore issues about knowledge in the workplace, to learn how other workplaces approach internal or external change processes, to discover new perspectives for employees and to examine issues of resistance and silence in workplace environments. But, learning opportunities must also be weighed against the realization that further education is a complex issue requiring time, commitment and opportunities to pursue new content, insight, theories, critical reflection and discussion with colleagues. Only through rich, informal discussions, readings from courses, independent study projects, literature reviews, research plans, analysis and recommendations will workplace learning emerge. Collectively, these insights will hopefully contribute to a more integrated framework of workplace learning.

Workplace Learners as Change-Agents

To offer opportunities to workplace learners, who are by nature lifelong learners and change-agents - is to offer opportunities for growth and development. While their paths may lead to career shifts, promotion, new workplace environment or to enhance leadership abilities, workplace learners are interested in how they can use their personal influence to make changes in their workplaces.

The nature of learners as change-agents to the workplace offers interesting characteristics about our learners. This suggests:

- the desire to be a change-agent within specific area(s) of organizations;
- informal evidence of calculated risk-taking behaviour in learners;
- an educated, skilled and sequencial approach to problem-solving;
- willingness to relocate to new opportunities and workplace upon graduation from programs;
- attention and concern for significant family members throughout the program;
• sophisticated approach to “balancing” competing interests in daily life;
• concern with the transition into and out of graduate courses/programs; and
• financial concerns associated with the program.

These qualities workplace learning may be composed of different types of learners requiring a range of formal academic opportunities including career laddering opportunities. Laddering provides for gradual learning in which one works through a certificate and is then able to use these credits to apply for advanced credit in a degree program. University of Calgary presently offers a minor in workplace learning that can be granted with the successful completion of courses and hours in one of three certificate areas. While graduate programs have traditionally been limited to traditional academic performance, broader formal graduate learning opportunities are potentially able to offer more to learners by using this integrative and progressive “building block” approach. Similarly, further linkages could be developed that offered laddering strategies with workplace employers and formal graduate learner partnerships.

The Learning Environment for Workplace Learners

Learning environments today function in different ways across many locations- at university, in homes and at work. Further, they operate using a range of on-line learning, institute and team formats and facilitation and consultative methods. The workplace learning field is grounded and integrated with the philosophical principles of the higher education teaching and learning field in Canada. This offers new growth for further research development including an emphasis on the:

• transactional teaching and learning model identified for the next phase of distance education development and its role in workplace learning;

• design and operation of flexible learning environments in workplace settings;

• expansion of workplace learning within the long-standing international teaching and learning fields; and

• surveying the teaching and learning and adult education research fields to assemble a conceptual framework of “best practices” for use in the workplace learning field.

In addition to the above, learning spaces for adults must be inviting and organized for the learning tasks. Spaces must be seen as a safe, comfortable, trustworthy, flexible, convenient, inviting and situated professional environment, while learners must be accepted as mature, thoughtful, and respected adults who are contributing to the exploration, understanding, and development of the workplaces in our society. Work consumes over a third of our time and yet historically this been underplayed to the peril of our heath and contentment. The future of workplace depends on our commitment, intention and action to establish quality learning environment conditions that can serve the workplace learner field either on or off-campus.

Communication, work groups, presentations, theme-focused activities and constructive discussion between learners, facilitators, experts and other resources are essential for learners. For this link to occur, a financial commitment of universities must be initiated in order to ensure workplace learners have a place to learn in today’s changing world.
Summary

This paper reviews the issues in a knowledge-based society and identifies workplace challenges faced by learners and graduate departments as they seek to develop formal graduate learning opportunities. Case studies were presented which illustrated how personal growth and development, openness to new learning approaches, and innovative linkages were achieved. These findings revealed three areas for consideration in an emerging conceptual framework for formal graduate learning opportunities.

Bibliography


