

The Explanatory Power of an Early Framework  
of Good Practice Principles in Workplace Education

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# **THE EXPLANATORY POWER OF AN EARLY FRAMEWORK OF GOOD PRACTICE PRINCIPLES IN WORKPLACE EDUCATION**

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The purpose of this investigation is to analyze 18 qualitative case studies of workplace education programs in Canada using a framework of principles of good practice. Results indicated that many of the components can be used as guide posts in the development of workplace education initiatives. In addition, certain framework components are supported, further defined and provide a foundational base for understanding the complexity of workplace learning.

Cette recherche a pour l'analyse de 18 études de cas qualitatives des programmes d'éducation en milieu de travail au Canada en utilisant un ensemble de principes de bonne pratique. Les résultats ont indiqué que plusieurs des composantes peuvent être utilisées comme guides dans le développement des initiatives en milieu de travail. En outre, certaines composantes cadres sont supportées, encore définies et fournissent une base fondamentale pour comprendre la complexité de l'étude en milieu de travail.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the late 80s workplace literacy has become recognized as an important part of the adult basic education field. However, the recentness of such activities in Canada has meant that information on this topic is still largely of the ephemeral sort. It also has meant that academic research is just beginning to address questions that may lead to the development of a theoretical orientation of this specific discipline.

Uvin and Jurmo (1996) point out that a range of workplace models and philosophies have now evolved. One model could be described as a workplace- driven paradigm where enhanced productivity and quality of goods and services are often articulated outcomes. A second model might be referred to as an approach emphasizing the needs of workers and in such a case the overall development of the worker is the anticipated result. What seems to be occurring now is the consensus that both these models do have certain common elements and one such element is in the area of principles of good practice.

According to Steel, Johnston, Folinsbee and Belifore (1997) principles of good practice are critical in decisions about how to enhance basic skills education. Program principles guide the steps of planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating workplace education initiatives. In an effort to describe the principles of good practice and workplace literacy, Belfiore (1995) noted some common themes in the literature such

as a focus around partnership, the importance of presenting a positive model of education, confidentiality, creating relevant learning situations and initial needs assessments. Using this foundational knowledge, a national forum was organized and individuals from across Canada representing business, labour, education and government further developed a framework of good practice principles in workplace education. Given the need for empirical evidence on this topic, the purpose of the investigation is to analyze 18 qualitative case studies of workplace education programs in Canada using the framework as a template. The nature of the analysis may help to determine the explanatory power of the framework in developing some early directions for theory in workplace literacy.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in the study is a descriptive design. In particular, a trend analysis approach is employed. This term is used to describe futures research methods and has been applied in the field of adult education policy and human resource development for a number of years (Cornish, 1977; Hoare, 1982; Taylor & Sutherland, 1994; Merriam & Simpson, 1995). By using a trend extrapolation technique on the various practices documented in the workplace case studies and analyzing these practices within the framework, a clearer picture will emerge as to the inter-relationships between the various components. Two data bases were used in the analysis: the case study data and the principles of good practice framework.

The final component of the framework is evaluation. Participants are recognized for their achievement. All partners should be involved in establishing key success factors that are relevant to them. There must be agreement among partners on how success is to be measured and what types of assessment tools should be considered. Adequate funding should be in place for evaluation. It is important that one determines before the beginning realistic objectives for the learner, the group and for the company if an evaluation is going to measure progress. It is also important to ensure that management is aware of the issues and those benefits that are not easily measured to prepare them for what can and cannot be evaluated. Evaluation can be measured on four levels: participation satisfaction, knowledge acquisition, knowledge transfer and the impact on other stakeholders.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Through a trend extrapolation technique each case study was content analyzed intensively using the nine factor framework. This process was facilitated by the fact that all case studies had been developed around the same sub-headings: company background, human resources policy, program description, services and training delivered, decision making about the program, program impacts, barriers to implementation, policy influences, innovative program features and advice to others. Data code sheets were prepared and research notes taken as the different good practice principles were uncovered in each case study write-up. Finally, summary charts were developed further revealing the results.

## RESULTS OF THE STUDY

In this section of the article, a section results of the analysis is presented. In the more complete article, each factor of the framework is depicted more fully through the practices described in the case studies. These results provide a characterization of the good practice framework not previously understood. It is organized in a similar fashion as to the preceding framework section but an attunement has been made to the nine different components.

### An Orientation of Worker Centeredness

On the first framework component of program orientation, a clear pattern of worker centeredness emerged. The majority of the 18 programs focused on specific worker needs. Of the many basic skills offered in the programs, six key areas were usually mentioned - reading, writing, mathematics, oral communications, work related problem solving, and computers. However it was difficult to see whether the goals of the trainee were all work related or personal development related. No definite trends emerged from this skill information. In nearly half of the programs, companies voiced an urgent need to deal with changes due to new technologies and saw the employee driven curriculum as a good way of transforming their work culture. A few programs were driven by the company's need to improve customer relations and provide a higher quality service.

### Vehicles for partnerships and participation

The second component in this framework focuses on the types of participation by primary and secondary partnerships. At least half of the programs examined use the term advisory or steering committee as the vehicle for overseeing the initiative. These joint venture committees consisted of labour, management representation and sometimes service providers. Incentive grants from various levels of government to assist in the stages of program development were usually mentioned as a success factor. Another common organizing structure was the internal training committee whose membership included management, a company training coordinator and employees. It was often noted that in these types of programs, employees felt a real ownership of the training and would have liked more opportunities to become involved in the decision making process. The role of the instructor varied from program to program. In some instances, besides teaching, they took on roles of raising awareness in the organization while in other cases they were advocates in the community. It was also observed that many types of partnership configurations proved to be highly functional.

### The Nature of Assessment

The fourth element in the framework relates to the various formats of assessment. One major theme that emerged in the case study data was that almost every program conducted an individual employee assessment during the planning stage and considered this activity to be of paramount importance to the success of the program. It was also noted that the various processes used in conducting these assessments developed employees' self confidence. In over half of the programs, the training needs of the workplace had been addressed either through an organizational needs assessment, literacy task analysis or variations of both. For those few programs that did not conduct an initial assessment of employee or workplace needs, there had been start up difficulty with mismatching of learners with curricula. A second pattern focused on the types of monitoring that took place throughout the program. In most cases, the instructors or teachers were involved in this process and occasionally peer assessment was noted. Overall, the process supported employee goals and confidentiality was respected. When employee goals included General Education for Development (GED) testing, learners decided who would receive the results. There was minimum use of computerized assessment techniques across all case studies. A third theme was related to how employers viewed the assessment process. Although many employers saw the value of the qualitative approach, some believed that a more quantitative approach would have benefitted the company more.

### From On-Going Learning to Lifelong Learning

At the centre of the framework is the component of on-going learning. Overall, most programs participants believed that the on-going learning , through the instruction of the basic skills, was the precursor for the setting of the stage for lifelong learning. In a few instances, the program was seen as contributing to the larger learning organization. This learning culture was evident at the very outset of the program when employees became involved in its planning and design to the learning that spilled over into their personal, family, and community lives. In over half of the case studies, the practical nature of the program content was directly linked to the workplace or specific tasks on the job. Another theme that clearly emerged from the data focused on the philosophy of management toward on-going learning. In all but a few cases, there was a genuine support from management to either promote or continue the services from the program. The support for on-going learning ranged from providing tutorial services for learners encountering difficulties to promoting the publishing of employees' stories. This kind of philosophy saw the program as part of a long term strategy to enhance employee satisfaction through training.

### What is Professional Development?

Another element in the framework is professional development. This factor had less clarity than the other components. What seems to emerge from the data was a profile of what types of training the instructors had as they became engaged in workplace education and some of the qualities of a professional in a workplace classroom. The term qualified instructor seemed to mean several things. On one hand there were instructors external to the company who were experienced in prior literacy activities and those who had received some type of formal training in adult education. Then, there were those internal staff people or course leaders who were well versed in human resource issues and very involved in all company training. One of the most important qualities necessary of an instructor was the ability to liase well among employees, management, the union and the service providing agencies. Good communication skills were essential for an instructor. A second quality was an ability to be adaptable with program curriculum, for example, being able to teach a GED program or to use a certain software program or a model from a different location or country. The third quality that was mentioned in some of the case study data was the availability of an instructor before and after scheduled classes. Surprisingly, no mention was made about the need for or types of continuous professional development for instructors.

## DISCUSSION

This study has attempted to illustrate how an early framework of good practice principles can be used to understand what is going on in a number of Canadian workplace education programs. Secondly, in terms of the explanatory power of the framework, this study has also helped to clarify how certain components are supported and further defined and how they can provide a foundational base for understanding the complexity of workplace learning.

On the first point, the results have indicated that many of the framework components may be useful as guide posts in the development of workplace education initiatives. It would appear that a number of common elements existed in the case study data that clearly surfaced when enlarged through the lens of the framework. One of these was the framework component of “Partnerships and Participation”. The data clearly indicated that by bringing different voices together to plan and carry out a program, partnerships can be formed at both the primary and secondary level. The notion of partnership appears crucial to any workplace intervention. Another component that can be used as a guide post is the program orientation of worker centredness. It was evident in the data that of the three foci or approaches towards a workplace education program, the orientation of a worker focus was prevalent. There appeared to be a tendency for creating relevant and meaningful learning situations which met the goals of the trainee first and often blended in with the goals of the organization.

Evidence was also provided for a third framework component--on-going assessment. Several key points are worthy of mention here. Almost every program analyzed in the study had conducted an individual employee assessment during the planning stage. Both the instructors and learners believed that this activity was of vital importance to the success of the program. Along with this, many of the programs, through trial and error, had made significant attempts to have the process of assessment viewed as a systematic event. A fourth component which could act as a guide post falls under the category of program content and delivery. Although the data was somewhat messy in this category, voluntary participation and conducting classes at the work site along with focusing on the basic skills that are relevant to the trainee emerged as flags.

On the second point of explanatory power, seven of the nine framework components were supported by evidence in the case study data. These included: program orientation, partnerships, assessment, on-going learning, principles of adult education, program content and evaluation. Two factors in the framework were less clearly defined--equity and professional development. This may be due to the early conceptualizations of these components and the somewhat indirect attention of this type of information in the actual case study write ups of the 18 programs. It may be useful to return to the early documents that give rise to these components and re-examine the core arguments looking for additional information.

Another area that is brought to the forefront as a result of the framework tool is the convergence between education and training. Although they have often been considered as polar extremes, the results of this study suggest that good training can include serious conceptual development and that education is more meaningful when it is conceptualized in practical activities. According to Castro and Oliveira (1996) the essence of successful learning strategies is to use the same workplace operations as a scaffold on which to build the conceptual or cognitive skills that are missing. As indicated in the results, the workplace can be an ideal context in which to plant cognitive development of a higher order. Thinking skills and functional reading and writing habits can be developed while doing practical tasks that lead to portable skills within an organization.

The framework of good practice principles has also helped clarify the “all embracing” view of lifelong learning. Together the framework components help explain that there is no single, unified and structured system of lifelong learning that suits all organizations. Rather, it reflects the cultures, particular conditions and needs of individual work sites. As pointed out by Hasan (1996) the very nature of lifelong learning depends on a great variety of initiatives taken by different actors and man spheres of life and work., In other words, it cannot be imposed but rather calls for cooperation and coordination among many stakeholders. This notion seems to be supported through the data analysis on program orientation, equity and on-going learning.

From a slightly different perspective, the results of this study suggest that the framework can provide an integrative structure for understanding the problematic situation of workplace education. Through this structure, certain inter-relationships between elements can be specified. Making a case for a variety of research methodologies, Kaplan (1996) believes that even when such sets of information as frameworks or structures are inexact, they have a role to play in the actual conduct of inquiry. In other words, it may be possible to now generate some hypotheses about the connections of the framework components and begin to develop appropriate research designs. As can be seen from this study, the value of the framework lies in part in its abstractness or in its many interpretations. The value lies also in the deductive quality of the structure so that unexpected consequences such as the lack of clarity around components such as equity and professional development can be tested by observation and experiments.

A final contribution of using the framework as a template in understanding workplace education is that the results have pointed to directions for further investigations in the area of learning theory. Although research and educational psychology may be expected to contribute to the foundation of training and development, it has been observed by most reviewers that very little integrative literature is available to work with since both domains exist side by side. (Lowyck, 1996). Understanding learning theory however, is essential for any systematic approach to the training design and its development. Of particular importance is the transfer of learning which aims at providing usable and adaptable knowledge and skills for future use. This is an area that has been overlooked in all of the programs analyzed in this investigation.

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