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Edward J. Marinos

University of Toronto, edward.marinos@sheridancollege.ca

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THE ADULT LEARNING CYCLE (ALC) MODEL[®] FOR BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS

An Introduction

By: Edward J. Marinos PhD, MEd, BEd, BA

(Taken and modified from the published Doctor of Philosophy thesis of Edward J. Marinos, “THE VIABILITY OF THE ADULT LEARNING CYCLE (ALC) MODEL[®] FOR BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS”, University of Toronto; ©Copyright 2009)

Introduction

In today’s global knowledge economy, effective workplace training is critical. Rapidly changing market forces create business conditions in which employees must be able to quickly acquire new knowledge. Given we are in a knowledge based economy (KBE) defined as “directly based on the production distribution, and use of knowledge and information” (Government of Canada, 2013); organizations are looking to maintain their advantage in a very tight competitive market place, not just through the products and services they produce but even more importantly, through the efficiencies and quality of their employees’ performance. To maintain a competitive edge, organizations must continue to attract and retain highly skilled employees, keep pace with competitors by increasingly becoming more innovative and productive by maximizing efficiencies through the use of technology (Arthur, 2003; Kessels, 2001).

Organizations continue to pay close attention to the different formats of learning that need to take place inside their walls. The debate for years has been focused intensively on the delivery format itself (i.e., whether it is classroom, on-the-job, online and now, social media). They also realize that learning needs to be interactive and must try and engage adult learners. They also realize that employees are busy, so they need to be prudent in terms of the amount of time spent away from work. All of that said, one area where the conversation has not been overly robust, both in business meeting rooms and in the research, are the details of the instructional design and delivery practices being used. Not the delivery format or mechanism itself or just the content itself,

but the quality and variety of the different forms of instructional methods, tactics and strategies that help adult learners better “digest” and retain what they are learning. This is important because what is retained has a better chance of being transferred back to the workplace. For example, in a study conducted by The Conference Board of Canada (Lavis, 2011) regarding the next generation of learning for organizations termed “Learning 2.0”, training was examined from a multitude of very important parameters that included: learning culture, priority, learning support, investment and organizational strategy. Nowhere in this extensive study was there any discussion and focus on what makes for effective curriculum development and/or the different forms of instructional design and delivery practices that address the different learning styles and experiences of adult learning audiences. Maybe in today’s world of learning in organizations this is not so important? In my experiences, it is unlikely.

Research Focus

The purpose of the Adult Learning Cycle (ALC) Model[®] research project was to examine the perceptions and experiences of Learning Professionals (i.e., Trainers, SMEs or Technical Experts) as they attempt to learn and apply this competency-based teaching learning model. The specific outcome was to establish whether or not the ALC Model lends itself to adult learning in the business world and if it influences Learning Professionals (LPs) in terms of how they design curriculum and deliver content to adult learners. The method of investigation in this qualitative research is a multiple case study design. This model was designed with the intention to help improve the way LPs develop curriculum, select instructional methods and deliver content to adults in business organizations. Current literature reveals an absence of an accepted application-based teaching and learning model dedicated for LPs. This could contribute to

lessening the ambiguity and inconsistencies of defining or setting a minimum benchmark level of acceptable LP competencies that continues to plague the profession.

Challenges

Evidence indicates that many LPs continue to be well represented as Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) or Technical Experts (TEs) but have limited knowledge of curriculum design practices, delivery strategies, and the implementation of adult learning practices. Parallel to this, research evidence continues to indicate the inadequate retention and transfer of knowledge and skills in the workplace (Gray & Herr, 1998; Saks & Belcourt, 2006). This translates into poor return on learning investment and inadequate knowledge management that impacts an organization's competitive advantage. With that said, improving LP capability may contribute to improving workplace knowledge and retention.

Effective training is essential for both of these processes. Consequently, business organizations currently spend billions of dollars on such programs each year in the United States and globally (Arthur, 2003; Ferraro, 2006; Kessels, 2001; Watt & Bloom, 2001). As Watt and Bloom (2001) observe:

Globalization continues to be a major economic force in Canada. It means that Canadian businesses are facing increasing competition at home and abroad. As our economy experiences more international competition it is driven to become more knowledge-based in order to prosper. More than ever, employers depend on knowledgeable and skillful employees to create value-added products and services, efficiently and effectively, so that they can compete successfully. (p. 3)

Despite this heavy investment in education, evidence suggests that training programs are not effectively contributing to employee professional development and workplace performance needs (Bloom, 2006; Bartlett, 2003; Dupilpovici, 2003; Fenwick, 2002; Gauld & Miller 2004; Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003; Williams, 2001; Zemke, 1999). Kessels (2001) estimates only

10% of training programs have an impact on employee performance. This is a significant concern. The billions of dollars invested in these programs clearly indicate a need for training, and the financial commitment of business organizations to the acquisition and growth of workplace knowledge. Yet, for many organizations, the return on investment for learning (ROIL) is poor.

Why is training often ineffective? The literature suggests that a significant part of the problem is poor hiring practices of Learning Professionals (LPs) (Bloom, 2006; Johnson & Leach, 2001). Many organizations take the perspective that anyone can be a LP (i.e., a Trainer) as long as they are knowledgeable in a particular content or subject area. They tend to hire or promote to the LP role Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) or Technical Experts (TEs), who have strong knowledge of an organization's products and/or services, but who usually do not have educational qualifications or instructional experience. According to Johnson and Leach (2001), a TE "possessing a high level of expertise can actually hinder one's ability to effectively share his or her knowledge with a trainee [as a result of] the automation of their over-learned processes" (p. 427). This translates into ineffective learning that impacts performance, wasted time and money, and lost training opportunities.

The SMEs possible lack of knowledge of adult education principles and training and development methods and techniques can present problems for organizations. Ineffective training delivery wastes dollars invested in instructors, training materials, and employees' time. When employees are not given the skills they need...to do their jobs this wastes additional dollars. (Williams, 2001, p. 92)

The reliance on SMEs is problematic, and evidence suggests that Canadian organizations are "continuing to rely more on SMEs to conduct formal training practices" (Dulipovici, 2003, p. 4). Dulipovici found that "despite the rising costs, close to half of SME (48%) expect to increase the amount of training offered in the next three years" (p. 4). The key problem is that SMEs tend

to have limited, if any, formal teaching experience or knowledge of adult learning theory and curriculum development (Bloom, 2006; Johnson & Leach, 2001). A considerable body of literature supports the view that the effectiveness of LPs is contingent upon their teaching and learning qualifications and experience (Birkenholz, 1999; Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990; Knowles, 1980; Kozlowski et.al., 2007; Leach, 1996; Olson, 1993; Williams, 2001).

Another key reason for ineffectiveness of workplace training is the sheer difficulty of ensuring that the content taught to learners is retained and transferred. Concepts that appeared to be learned and understood by an employee during a training session are not always applied correctly when the employee goes back to work. This often leads to personal performance gaps that can negatively impact both business unit and overall organizational performance. The problem of transfer is a difficult one to overcome. Caffarella (1994) states that “until fairly recently, it was assumed that this transfer of learning would somehow just happen” (p. 107). Thus, LPs must design, plan, prepare, and deliver learning programs in ways that will not only improve learner retention, but also ensure that knowledge can be accurately applied and transferred to the workplace.

Rather, it [transfer of learning] is an element of the process that is currently receiving increased attention as both participants and sponsors of educational programs demand more concrete and useful results...it is essential that a plan be developed for helping participants apply what they have learned. (Caffarella, p. 108)

Better prepared, and better qualified, LPs could significantly improve the effectiveness of workplace training. Unfortunately, there is not a clear, widely accepted set of qualifications and competencies for LPs (Gauld & Miller, 2004, Lawler & King, 2003; Meyer & Marsick, 2003). According to Bloom (2006), “there is no standard-setting body or codified certification process for trainers. Rather, there are scattered areas and types of certification throughout the field such

as universities, professional organizations, self-certifying commercial training programs or businesses that offer independent accreditations” (p. 12). As a result, most training sessions continue to be taught by SMEs, and PowerPoint slides tend to be the focal point of curriculum delivery and content sequencing.

Given that evidence indicates training conducted in organizations has not been successful, the challenge becomes growing the teaching competencies of those assigned to the LP role. This suggests a need to familiarize LPs with adult education theory, the problem of transfer, and knowledge of different instructional strategies. Although there are currently no standards for the certification of workplace training, I have worked extensively with one model, called the Adult Learning Cycle (ALC) Model[©], that is specially designed to tackle the aforementioned problems. In my experience, the ALC Model has significant promise in terms of helping trainers develop effective teaching practices.

Purpose of the ALC Model[©]

The ALC Model is a competency-based teaching and learning model specifically designed for LPs who develop curriculum and/or teach adult learners in business/workplace learning environments. The ALC Model offers an *organizing layer* that helps LPs put more thought and planning into the creation of curriculum, and the structure of delivery. It has four independent stages that interact and support one other to support LPs as they *think through* the structure of curriculum and corresponding delivery strategies. Some parts of ALC Model prompt LPs to connect their instruction to well-established learning theories (e.g., Bloom’s Taxonomy, Multiple Intelligence, and Adult Learning Theory) and their application. Other parts focus on the problem of transfer, and how to overcome it.

The ALC Model is of interest because it represents a promising attempt to address some of the pervasive problems associated with workplace training. In an attempt to better understand both the strengths and limitations of this model, this research follows a group of LPs as they go through the process of learning the ALC Model and then attempt to apply it in their own organizations.

My experiences as a LP in both private and public sector organizations has provided me with consistent experiences and observations related to how organizations develop, design, and deliver adult learning. Irrespective of the type of organization (e.g., private sector, government, quasi public-private sector, not-for-profit), weak curriculum design and delivery strategies fail to achieve significant improvement in knowledge retention and knowledge transfer. Many organizations continue to believe that Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) who have extensive knowledge and experience about the products, services and/or processes of the organization will also have the capability to develop and deliver this knowledge to employees. As mentioned earlier, the common problem is that most “trainers” do not have formal knowledge, skills, and experiences in adult teaching and learning. That said, they are even further removed from the process of curriculum design.

Many organizations have leading edge, up-to-date, and relevant content (i.e., related to products, services, service expectations, manager and leadership expectations), but unless they have the capability to deliver and teach this information in ways that enable people to retain and accurately apply and transfer the knowledge to the workplace, they are, in terms of impact, “throwing money into the wind.” As mentioned earlier, the training profession in business organizations does not have a consistent and well-defined process for determining what constitutes both the *technical* and *behavioural* skills required to make for an effective LP. In

other words, a wide range in knowledge and skill exists without any formal governing body to establish a minimum standard benchmark for required performance. For example, teachers in the province of Ontario must achieve academic and professional practical standards in order to become licensed practitioners. This is not the case for LPs. This is critical, as “a major characteristic of a profession is that it has a base of research knowledge” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 1999, p. 3). The need to improve LP capability will require greater attention to a more concise acquisition of research knowledge and consistent application within professional practice.

The ALC Model research study is intended to add to the limited amount of research related specifically to LP competencies in the field of Training and Development. Many who are assigned to the LP role are not up-to-date and/or do not explore relevant research. As Gall, Gall, and Borg (1999) state, “If you wish to be a fully informed member of a profession, you will need to learn about the knowledge generated by researchers” (p. 3). The ALC Model research study is intended to encourage and appeal to LPs to apply a variety of training methods and techniques grounded in theory with the assistance of a competency-based teaching and learning model. By identifying with, and applying the ALC Model, they would begin to apply learning theory and methods generated by researchers. The intention, of course, is to change behaviour so LPs continue in a life-long ambition to further explore knowledge generated by relevant research and to deliver effective adult-centred teaching practices.

Years of experience using and delivering the ALC Model structure to college instructors, LPs and SMEs/TEs in business organizations has produced a wide variety of responses. These experiences have led me to more-precisely examine the viability of the ALC Model in business organizations more-precisely, to closely examine the perceptions and experiences of LPs who have been formally taught the ALC Model and have attempted to use its structure in personal

teaching practices. This information may help in identifying where LPs may need further development opportunities related to the design of curriculum and the delivery of adult-centred learning programs. This information could be passed on to other LPs or individuals who are part of the learning and development community exploring new and innovative ways to effectively design and deliver adult-centred learning in business organizations.

Conclusion

In summary, the challenge of the ALC Model will be its acceptance and sustainability in business organizations. The results of this study indicate the ALC Model has the potential to change the way LPs think about learning because it did influence behaviour and skill change among research participants as it relates to their ability to design and deliver adult learning. It has the potential to change the way adult learning is developed, designed, and delivered in terms of the more common instructor-centred approaches that continue to exist. It also has the potential to encourage LPs to think more prudently and use relevant theory-related curriculum design and adult learning approaches in order to better prepare their content and delivery methods. The ALC Model did not, however, influence a change in focus on achieving improvements in learning transfer. Overall, the study indicated further development needs are necessary for LPs as it relates to designing and delivering adult-centred learning programs. The question that remains is whether or not the ALC Model can become an accepted device within the Learning and Development field.

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