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Enhancing flexible business training: learners and enterprises

The Authors

Peter J. Smith, *Peter J. Smith is a Lecturer in Professional Education and Training, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia.*

Abstract

Although flexible training is widely supported by enterprises and government, there are considerable challenges in ensuring successful training outcomes. The evidence is that business learners, at a vocational training level, are not typically well-equipped for the self-directed learning required by flexible training, nor do they prefer to learn from textually presented learning packages. This paper suggests a number of strategies that may be used to prepare both learners and enterprises for successful outcomes from flexible training.

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The potential for flexible training

Flexible training for employees is expected to provide considerable value to firms and other organisations looking for a competitive edge through skilled work. Both in the UK and in Australia the flexible delivery of training has enjoyed considerable support from government, from industry and commerce, and from both public and private providers of training.

The reasons for an increased interest in flexible training are several, and derive largely from economic considerations, and from the enabling characteristics of modern communications and multimedia technologies. Changing workplace demands and the need for rapid response to new business conditions and opportunities have meant that training for new skills has also to be responsive, and able to be implemented in a fast moving environment. At the same time, there has been a recognition that the workplace itself forms a rich and authentic learning environment, and a focus on research and practice in workplace learning.
over the last ten or so years has resulted in more sophisticated thought and practice in that form of situated learning.

Enabling the better provision of flexible training at the workplace have been the new available technologies. The variety of experience that can be provided to learners at their workplace has been enhanced by computer assisted learning, by the vast array of material available through the Internet and other multimedia forms such as CD-ROM. Additionally, the development of groupware systems that allow for interactive computer mediated communication to occur, either synchronously as chat rooms, or asynchronously in conference format, has enhanced the ability of learners to interact across time and distance with each, and with their trainers.

This flexibility, both in expectations and in processes, also provides for flexibility of outcome. As Evans and Smith (1999) have observed, a hallmark of flexible training is the ability of the client (either individual learner or enterprise) to specify what it is that is to be learned, when, where, how, and to what level of competency. It no longer is the province only of training providers to decide these things and for clients to “fit in”.

But there are major challenges

While there has been an enthusiastic embracing of flexible training by government and enterprises, there are major challenges involved in its successful implementation in workplace settings. In the UK, Sadler-Smith et al. (2000) have observed that these methods have not been as enthusiastically sought by the workers who participate in that form of learning as they have been by their managers. Also working across a wide spectrum of UK enterprises, Calder and McCollum (1998) have noted that learners are not often ready for the form of self-directedness demanded by flexible training, nor necessarily are their employers. The situation in Australia mirrors these observations. Large-scale research projects, by Warner et al. (1998) and by Smith (2000a, 2000b), have each shown that vocational learners are not typically self-directed nor are they typically attracted to flexible training that requires independent learning. Also mirroring the UK situation, there is evidence (e.g. Brooker and Butler, 1997; Smith, 2000b) that Australian enterprises are not well placed to support workplace learning that is flexibly delivered.

Business learners in particular

The Australian research on learners engaged in vocational programs, either in the workplace or in institutional environments, indicates not only that they are ill-prepared for self-directed learning, but that they are also not text-friendly. Their preference is to learn through hands-on experience, through observation, from mentors in the workplace, or from practice. Learning from textually presented packages of learning material, presented either in print form or online, provides a considerable challenge to these learners.

Smith (2000a) research included a detailed analysis of 408 business learners involved in the acquisition of operational office skills such as word-processing, database, spreadsheets and computer accounting systems. That research indicated that two major dimensions described the learning preferences of these learners. First, a dimension of dependent-self-directed learning was evident and, second, a dimension of verbal-non-verbal learning was identified.
The learners in Smith’s sample of 408 such learners were typically dependent and non-verbal learners. In other words, they liked to learn within a structure provided by the trainer, and in an environment where they could seek guidance from their trainer and fellow learners, and to engage in discussion with those others. The results also mean that these learners like to learn in that structured and social environment using real life tasks, rather than reading about them or listening to a trainer talk about them.

Figure 1, drawn from the results of the Australian research, shows very clearly the tension that exists between the typical disposition of business learners at the vocational level and the expectations placed on them by flexible training. Those results provide considerable challenge to a model of flexible training that is based on engaging in learning independently through the use of packaged learning resources at home or in the workplace.

What does this mean for flexible training design?

What these findings about learners do not mean is that we should abandon flexible training and return to the structured classroom. The challenges facing enterprises and their need for constantly re-skilling and up-skilling their workforces are too profound for that. What we must do is develop the learning programs in a way that is engaging to learners; as well as developing learners to become more self-directed and more able to effectively use a wide range of learning media. We also need to provide the attitudes and infrastructure among enterprises to ensure the support that is necessary to achieve successful outcomes from flexible training.

Referring to Figure 1 again, we need to identify the strategies we can use to reduce the gap between quadrants A and C. Those strategies fall into two broad groups. First, we need a set of strategies to assist individual business learners in the workplace to move more towards quadrant C and, second, we need a set of strategies for enterprises to support learners in doing so. Within the set of enterprise strategies, we also need to ensure that flexible training delivery recognises and responds to the typical learner characteristics shown by quadrant A.

Developing effective strategies for learners

Three broad sets of strategies can be identified as assisting learners to develop from quadrant A to quadrant C (Smith, 2000b). In summary, these strategies are:

1. (1) development of self-directed learning skills;
2. (2) development of required skills and knowledge through a wide range of learning strategies and learning materials; and
3. (3) development of ability to structure own learning within the community of practice at the workplace.

The development of self-directed learning skills requires a set of specific strategies that ensure that each learner has the opportunity to discuss, identify and pursue learning goals that have meaning to them as an individual and that are required by their enterprise. Largely, that means that new learning needs to be contextualised within existing skills and knowledge, and clearly connected to the role the individual plays, or is expected to play, in
the enterprise. In practical terms it is necessary for these learning goals to be developed between the learner and supervisor or trainer, and committed to by each. The progress towards those goals needs to be monitored by the learner as well as the supervisor/trainer and discussion on progress regularly undertaken. Also necessary from the trainer or supervisor is assistance with the development of structured guidance to achieve those learning goals within the expected time-frame. This process is not dissimilar from the development of a learning contract between the learner and the supervisor/trainer to clearly specify outcomes, and to specify the guidance and structure to be made available to the learner.

Developing skills and knowledge through engagement with a wide range of learning strategies and learning materials is an important part of ensuring that workers can develop knowledge from a variety of sources. Within the workplace there are expert others to learn from through demonstration, guided practice, discussion and systematic mentoring. The indications from the research are that these forms of knowledge construction are favoured by vocational business learners because they are not dependent on text, and they enable social interaction as a means to learning. However, much of workplace knowledge acquisition also depends on listening to others, and on reading. Apart from learning programs that are provided in print or on-screen form, workplace learners also appropriate knowledge from enterprise policy and procedures manuals, technical journals, technical manuals, and manufacturers’ instruction books. There is considerable value in assisting business learners to become proficient in the development of expertise from those text-based sources. Provision to learners of these forms of text-based resources in an environment that enables discussion and guidance is a necessary part of ensuring the development of confidence in the use of that sort of material. Connecting the text-based material to actual workplace practice is valuable, and may be achieved through guided discussion between workers and expert others, with supervisors, and with trainers.

The strategies suggested above recognise that the workplace forms a community within which there are accepted practices. Assisting learners in the workplace to identify and access this community of practice is an important component of becoming more self-directed in learning. The recognition and accessing of the skills of another worker is an important part of developing independence in learning, and learning from each other is a common workplace practice. Assisting learners to structure that sort of experience into the achievement of their learning goals is important, just as it is important to develop a workplace culture where that is accepted as good practice. It is not unusual for researchers of workplace learning to make the observation that workers are often reticent to ask for assistance from another for fear that they are seen to be deficient. Developing among workers the confidence to seek help is important if the community of practice is to be effectively utilised as a legitimate learning resource.

**Developing effective strategies for enterprises**

Again, three broad sets of strategies suggest themselves for the development of effective enterprise support for flexible training (Smith, 2000b). These strategy areas, in summary, are:
1. (1) development of clear training policies;
2. (2) development of training structures; and
3. (3) development of trainer skills to support flexible training.

Training policies to support flexible training need to be clear about the value placed on training by the enterprise, and be explicit that the enterprise encourages and supports learners. As mentioned earlier, there is a tension between the worker as learner and as productive unit, such that the needs of learners can be second to those of production. Enterprises wanting learners to be confident in their own learning and to access the resources of the workplace to develop knowledge and skills develop a culture in which learning is not seen as “time out”, and where the requests for assistance that are made by learners are treated seriously and not as deflections away from production imperatives. How the learning is to be secured, guided, and assessed is an important issue for enterprises to be clear and explicit about, and should be regularly reinforced to all employees – those who assist learners through their expert knowledge as well as those requiring assistance.

Structures to support flexible training are important, and require that enterprises are explicit about accountabilities of learners and their supervisors, trainers and mentors. The research evidence (e.g. Brooker and Butler, 1997; Harris et al., 1998; Smith, 2000b) from workplaces not uncommonly observes that learners within enterprises are quite unclear about who is responsible for their training, and what assistance they can expect from others. Those roles and expectations need to be clear, along with the requirements for training documentation and management.

Flexible training also places trainers, supervisors and mentors in a facilitation role rather than a role of expository teaching. The job of these people becomes one of guiding learners to set and achieve their own goals, to monitor their own progress, and to guide them in accessing learning resources from across the enterprise. Those learning resources may be purpose-designed learning programs, they may be experiential, or they may be more expert others. Trainers and others who support flexible training may require some assistance to develop the skills of developing mutually agreed learning contracts, monitoring them and guiding learners towards achievement, as well as skills to assist and guide learners in the identification and selection of relevant learning resources in the enterprise or beyond it.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the value to enterprises and learners of flexible training, but has also identified research that indicates challenges confronting learners and enterprises pursuing successful outcomes from this form of training. Those challenges focus largely on the nature of the learners themselves, and on the enterprise context of support provided for flexible training. The paper has suggested broad areas of strategy that may need attention in the successful implementation of enterprise-based flexible training, and has made some specific suggestions to support those strategies.

Finally, although the discussion in this paper has focused on enterprise-based learners of vocational level business skills in particular, evidence from other research (e.g. Smith,
2000a; 2000b) indicates that the same considerations may be applied to the development of operator and trade skills in workplaces.

Figure 1 Two-dimensional representation of factors describing business vocational learner preferences

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