

Is There A Future for Research in University Continuing Education?

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ABSTRACT

University-based Continuing Education units have become primarily focused on market driven programs at a time when market demand for continuing education has attracted a great deal of competition in that field. As a consequence, much of the purpose for having CE as a specialized function within universities has been eroded. A robust research program that focussed on the way in which learning occurs within organizational contexts is suggested as an emerging area of opportunity and need. This would, in turn, have the potential to create a renewed sense of purpose for CE and strengthen universities' efforts to contribute to economic and community development.

Doing such research well would involve careful attention to the sometimes conflicting interests of individuals and the organizations which structure much of their lives. It would tend to build on the

RÉSUMÉ

Les unités d'éducation permanente basées à l'université se dirigent de façon prépondérante vers les programmes à l'initiative du secteur privé à un moment où la demande du marché pour l'éducation permanente attire beaucoup de compétition. Comme conséquence, les raisons pour lesquelles l'éducation permanente existe comme fonction spécialisée à l'intérieur des universités ont diminué d'importance. L'auteur suggère un programme de recherche robuste se dirigeant vers les façons par lesquelles l'apprentissage se fait à l'intérieur des contextes organisationnels comme le nouveau domaine de besoins et de possibilités à exploiter. Ceci pourrait créer un regain d'un but bien précis de l'éducation permanente et fortifierait les efforts des universités pour contribuer au développement économique et communautaire.

Pour faire une telle recherche, il

strengths of continuing educators, their experience with individual learners and inter-organizational partnerships and their know-how based on working within a “knowledge intensive” environment. At the same time it would address a major area of concern for almost all organizations, including businesses, government agencies and non-profits. Some specific starting points for such research are suggested.

faudrait porter une attention particulière aux intérêts, quelquefois antagonistes, mais qui structurent une grande partie des vies des individus et des organismes. Il y aurait une tendance à s’appuyer sur les qualités des éducateurs en éducation permanente, leur expérience avec des apprenants individuels, leurs partenariats inter-organisationnels et leur savoir-faire basé sur le travail à l’intérieur d’un environnement “intensif en connaissances”. En même temps, cela adresserait un domaine d’intérêt spécial pour plusieurs organismes, y compris les entreprises, les agences à buts non-lucratifs et gouvernementales. Aussi l’auteur y suggère-t-il quelques points de départ pour effectuer une telle recherche.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to provoke thinking about the future of research in university continuing education (UCE) in Canada. This is done in four stages. The first recognizes that the role of UCE units can no longer be justified in the terms it once was and therefore that a new role must be found. This new role may be found by focusing primarily on the interplay between the interests of individuals and the organizations in which they learn. The second stage suggests some starting points for research that is consciously situated within the context of organizational learning. The third draws on the author’s professional experience in working with organizations that are aware both of the need to understand organizational learning more fully and of some of the factors that have caused learning to become a significant part of their agenda. The final stage concludes that the

kind of future for UCE research being recommended in this paper differs from the kind of research universities have tended to value more traditionally. Instead, future research has the potential to involve UCE practitioners in more complex and swampier territory, but territory in which there is important work to be done.

STAGE I

For many of us who have had a role in UCE in Canada for some time, it is easy to accept the value of our role as simply an article of faith. Nevertheless, the argument that might plausibly have been advanced 10 years ago—that continuing education (CE) units are needed to keep the university focused on the needs of part-time, mature, and geographically distant students—has been considerably weakened by a wider recognition of the need for more applied, mid-career programs. The growing influence of professional schools within the academy, and the development of a significant market for educational services have further called it into question. Finally, the argument that CE makes the university more accessible rings somewhat hollow when so many of its programs are more expensive than “regular” classes and so few significant CE programs remain that are not market focused.

Two aspects of CE practice are sorely needed, however, if universities are to be successful in taking advantage of some of the many opportunities currently open to them. The first is the professional know-how that is common within, if not unique to, CE units; these units are accustomed to offering cost-recovery programs and managing partnership and client relationships with diverse external organizations. Universities will need to develop and value this kind of know-how if they are to compete with other educational providers in a relatively open marketplace and if they are to fulfil their mandate properly for all students.

The second aspect involves research of a sort that ought to be the province of continuing educators, that is, research into the highly complex way in which individual learning interacts with the organizational contexts that shape so much of our lives. “Ought to” is used here because just how much of this type of research currently exists is unknown. It is, nonetheless, a part of the practice of CE, in the sense that any good CE unit, that is, a unit that is thoughtful about its students and their aspirations in their work and/or community involvements, must be at least somewhat attuned to these complexities. What is clear, however, is that a more robust research

program is required if universities are to take advantage of their strengths and contribute to society in the ways they could and should.

The kind of research that is required is inquiry into the ways in which people in organizations learn. In order to be worthwhile, this research must be structured to avoid treating individuals simply as a means to accomplishing organizational ends, as is the case with many training programs. Just as crucially, learning must not be treated simply as an intrinsic value, or as a value independent of the specific organizational cultures and objectives that shape people's lives and work.

Research questions that might be asked include: What factors make it difficult to introduce new technology or new organizational forms? What is the influence of factors such as background educational attainment, for example, on the time or amount of training needed to adapt to significant changes of various types? How much can training programs be shortened or eliminated by proper attention to and encouragement of the informal learning that occurs naturally in workplaces and other organizational settings? How job specific or role specific must training be, in various circumstances, to be effective? How can the value of programs that develop more general abilities (such as critical thinking) or virtues (such as open-mindedness) be recognized in relation to organizational objectives? How important is it for people involved in a common enterprise to study together, as opposed to enrolling independently in educational programs? How can the relationship between what is learned through experience, on the job or in the community, and what is learned in more formal educational settings be best understood? How can we realistically measure the value of investments in education, both for individuals and for organizations, be realistically measured?

Although many of these questions can be addressed from a variety of perspectives, given the universities' generally dismal record of conducting research on the effects of their own programs, these questions are unlikely to be addressed very systematically unless some group emerges to attend to them. Having some well-informed basis for addressing the issues raised by these questions is, or could be, an important part of the value of having universities involved in CE.

STAGE II

Businesses, governments, and community organizations, as well as individuals, are spending enormous amounts of time and money based on hunches about what kinds of education and training are most helpful. However, there are few systematic studies into learning as it occurs in the context of organizational life or in relation to the purposes of different kinds of organizations.

A few promising starting points do exist, though. Etienne Wenger's recent book, *Communities of Practice* (1998), provides a social theory of learning, consciously situated in the communities of practice that are common to organizational life. Wenger explores ways in which patterns of organizational life are both fixed and altered by mutual processes of engagement and reification (the creation and use of the "things" of organizational life). This opens up promising territory for researchers who might examine the ways in which communities of practice are formed by their history of both formal and informal learning.

Max Boisot (1998) proposes an alternative to the ways in which classical economic theories have dealt with the value of knowledge and learning. In doing so, he traces the social learning curve that measures the changing value of knowledge through cycles of innovation. He does this along three dimensions: the degree of dissemination of knowledge, its level of abstraction, and the extent of its codification. He points out that the types of learning required to maximize the value of knowledge change in relation to changes in these variables. As with Wenger's work, this suggests a range of research studies that might examine, in a more empirical manner, the ways in which learning occurs in the context of organizations. Such studies are needed because most organizations, whether corporate, governmental, or nonprofit, are undergoing significant changes and most of them recognize that learning is the key to coping with these changes.

STAGE III

In my own work, I have encountered three major types of circumstances that are pushing change and learning to the forefront of organizations' awareness.

The first and most obvious is technological change. The increased ability to gather information and to communicate electronically with large

numbers of people is changing almost every organization. The money and time involved in training and retraining people to keep up with the constant pace of technological change is causing some organizations to step back and think about some of their assumptions, including their assumptions about training needs for new employees, the relative responsibilities of individuals and corporations for relevant training, and how employees are rewarded and retained.

The second is planned cultural change within organizations. As the assembly line mentality of Taylorism is replaced by emerging models that recognize the dispersed nature of intelligence and decision-making throughout organizations, many organizations are struggling to break down "silos" and foster more decentralized responsibilities. If these are to be more than exercises in public relations, significant learning is required on the part of many of the players. Universities, including their CE units, have extensive experience in dealing with knowledge workers and are, in some ways, quite admirably equipped both to contribute to understanding these issues and to design programs that contribute to making the relevant changes.

The third circumstance is demography. This may become the most significant issue of the three in many businesses and in some whole industries in Canada. A combination of factors including the baby boom, down-sizing in corporations based on Canada's recent economic history as well as technological changes, and shifts in generational attitudes seem to be combining to create organizations with disproportionate numbers of employees close to retirement. In many cases, traditional approaches to employee development have been allowed to lapse. At the same time, new and evolving roles mean that new employees will have far more complex and multifaceted responsibilities than would have been the case a generation ago. Coping with this rapid loss of know-how within organizations (both technical and managerial) and finding innovative ways for passing it along are challenges worthy of the best efforts of the organizations themselves and anyone who purports to know something about how adults learn.

STAGE IV

These three sets of circumstances, which prompt organizations to focus their attention on learning, and therefore to be receptive to focused research linked to practical results, a possible future for research in CE. This kind of

focus could, put CE back “on the edge,” leading the university into important territory, even if not all of the university community wants to go there.

Universities have traditionally focused on students as individuals, failing to take into account their extended involvement inside other organizations. Even when universities have dealt with mature students and those who are mid-career, they have tended to use this same model of drawing students out of their workplaces and community involvements for the purposes of reflection or to learn new capacities. Learning has been conceptualized as something that happens primarily in a course or program to be taken back to the student’s workplace. Most CE programs are also built on this open enrolment model where individuals from disparate backgrounds and with varied interests come together to learn as individuals, even if the programs are designed to promote students learning from each other.

CE research (and probably some CE practice) should be more narrowly focused on how people in organizations learn in relation to the particular contexts they are in and the challenges they face. This kind of research would not only require close attention to the situated circumstances of learners but also a willingness to cope with the complexities and moral ambiguities that characterize the interplay between individuals and organizations.

Achieving such a future would require CE researchers to focus more on what their unique role might be and less on being like other researchers in the university. It would mean exploiting the closer links CE tends to have with outside organizations rather than emphasizing the similarities many CE faculty share with other academic faculty members. As such, it may be seen as a dangerous course to take. Nonetheless, it does have the potential to renew the role of CE in the university and could contribute to universities renewing their place in a rapidly changing economy and society.

REFERENCES

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BIOGRAPHY

Mark Selman is Executive Director of the Learning Strategies Group, Faculty of Business Administration, Simon Fraser University. He was previously both Associate and Acting Dean of Continuing Studies at SFU and has been President of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education. He is a co-author of *The Foundations of Adult Education in Canada*.

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