Chapter XX
Technology–Enhanced Learning in the Corporate Context

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on tools and strategies to integrate the strengths of formal and informal learning in the corporate context via the use of work-based activities within courses. The following proposition is argued: an effective course in the corporate context becomes a blend of formal and informal learning, a guided opportunity to learn from and share experiences gained through work-based activities, and to contribute one's own experiences as learning resources for others, for use in both formal and informal learning settings. Examples from practice in a multinational corporate learning context where a number of courses have been redesigned to allow integration of formal and informal learning are given. Key issues and challenges arising from this experience are discussed.

GLOBAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES, ORGANISATIONS AND LEARNING FOR WORK

Workplaces are being transformed by global changes. Haughey (2000) outlines some characteristics of this transformation. Firstly, global economic integration is bringing about homogeni-sation as well as increased diversification. Secondly, advances in technology are influencing the organisation of work and traditional demarcations in the workplaces (Billett, 2001). Technological innovations are resulting in redistribution of the workforce and rise of knowledge workers (Drucker, 1999). What do these changes mean for learning in organisations?

The first implication is increased global competition, which means organisations have to be informed about potential clients and suppliers and prepared to respond to their needs in a dynamic and flexible way. They have to be able to quickly adapt in order to accommodate market changes. To do this effectively, organisations need employees who are able to solve novel complex problems for which often no previous knowledge base exists. To solve novel problems, employees must be able not only to process information, but also to generate information and create knowledge (Nonaka, 1994).

The second implication of the global transformations in the nature of work is that organisational structures change from traditional, hierarchical to task-based team models.

Thirdly, to flexibly adapt to the rapid changes, employees are required to become lifelong learners, "…actively wanting, thinking, feeling and doing beings, who will regard personal objectives as congruent with the objectives of the organisation, who will align their desires with organisational advancement, who will seek continually to adapt to its changing needs--and who therefore are sufficiently flexible and with capacity to regulate themselves" (Usher, 2000, p. 228). To develop such active and self-regulating employees, not only new models of management and organisation but also new training methods are required.

Fourthly, information and communication technology has been developing rapidly. Network technology in particular has changed the way organisations operate, at the same time creating new expectations of employees. Some of these changes include increased demand for higher levels of conceptual and symbolic knowledge; upskilling of some tasks while automating, routinising or eliminating others; re-organisation of work through electronic means; shortened and more transformational production cycles; and heightened levels of uncertainty. Billett (2001, p. 46) further argues that "these changes require workers to respond to new tasks, understand new concepts and develop new procedures."

In the context of these transformations, criteria for what constitutes effective learning are changing as well. In learning for work, employees are required to demonstrate outcomes directly relevant to organisational needs, short- and long-term goals, and the ability to solve complex workplace problems, working collaboratively in distributed, often culturally-diverse teams, building knowledge from different sources and different perspectives, and applying it in a flexible way (Jakupec & Garrick, 2000).

These new workplace demands are in sharp contrast with the traditional ways of training in organisations. The assumption that the employees will learn these highly complex skills in traditional formal learning settings divorced from workplace needs and context is no longer tenable. It is equally untenable that the knowledge and skills required for modern workplace can be picked up from experienced peers or coaches in informal, workplace learning settings alone. New learning strategies are needed that will bridge work and learning. New pedagogies are needed that will allow employees to learn while working and work while learning.

Network technology can enable such integration in unprecedented ways. It can extend learning into the workplace; provide access to resources, expert guidance, and scaffolding while learners work and learn in their own workplace; bridge prior knowledge and learning in novel situations; and support collaborative learning in distributed teams. Technology in itself, however, will not be sufficient to make the integration happen. Pedagogic methodologies premised on interdependence of work and learning are needed. A work-based learning methodology that aims to integrate formal and informal learning is proposed in this chapter. The discussion is organised around the following questions:

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