

Workplace Environments Are Evolving: Is Adult E-Learning Keeping Pace?

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Abstract: Modern organizations are evolving into dynamic workplaces, challenging employees to become involved in new, exciting ways. *Reengineering* challenges employees to embrace roles that are evolving as quickly as their organizations. New roles provide *empowerment* for employees who become increasingly *self-managed* within these *learning organizations*. Personal growth is not only initiated and nurtured – but expected. More of these employees are entering our virtual classrooms, welcoming the opportunity and challenge that higher education represents. The focus of this paper is whether educational institutions are up to the task. Have they evolved as other modern organizations? Are they prepared to extend through e-learning the work that learning organizations began? Is higher education up to the challenges that these individuals bring from their workplaces into our virtual classrooms? Moreover, are we as e-learning educators prepared for these dynamic, empowered, and self-managed individuals?

Today's adult students engaged in e-learning are often professional men and women who work for a living and take college courses via the Internet. As employees during the day, these individuals face workplace roles that have been evolving rapidly. First, they are often involved in *self-managed teams*. Second, they are *empowered* as employees within their organizations. Third, firms have been undergoing *reengineering* wherein organizations evolve into flatter configurations with far fewer reporting levels, thus expecting employees to take on additional responsibilities. Fourth, *participative management* in organizations is an emerging concept enabling more men and women to determine what decisions should be made, with little, if any, upper management intervention. Fifth, one of the key tenets of managing and orchestrating *change* in organizations today is to involve workers from all levels in change initiatives, as early as possible in, and then throughout, the process. Finally, these men and women find themselves working then in what Senge (1990) termed *learning organizations*, where new ideas are needed, knowledge must be transferred, and behaviors must change.

These substantive organizational developments represent considerable challenge to educators. They are suddenly faced with an evolving set of expectations from their adult students. At work, these individuals are taking charge of their own careers and their own organizations on a broad-based, multi-dimensional, and escalating basis. They expect to be able to do the same in their virtual classrooms. Organizations are not merely *enabling* employees to participate in new ways. They are *expecting* these men and women to perform in myriad evolving initiatives. Hence, when these individuals engage in e-learning as adult students, we, as instructors, need to determine how to participate most effectively with them.

After long, often difficult, and challenging workdays the last thing these nontraditional students need is an academician who is going to unilaterally direct their learning. In these settings, we, as educators, can, instead, leverage the workplace experiences that these individuals have just had, building upon them across their e-learning courses. Kidd (1973) called this the art of learning rather than schooling. Livingstone (2001) noted that in this information age there is more knowledge accessibility in our learning society within which workers can extend their learning. Adult learning theory includes the need for nontraditional learners to participate in the formulation of their learning in order for that learning to be most effective (Brookfield, 1986). This concept aligns with the experiences these nontraditional students have throughout their workdays.

Moreover, Friere (1970), Houle (1996), and Mezirow (2000) determined that adult education must include some element of empowerment, while Dewey (1926) said that education must be a constructive process rather than a passive activity. Kidd (1973) spoke about the *learning transaction*, where students must be involved in the process. Knowles (1990) envisioned shared learning enmeshed with shared authority. Collaborative teaching and learning (Conti, 1978) has been found to be a significant component of adult learning theory. Instructional models formulated by Merriam and Caffarella (1999) included both student self-direction and control of their own learning. Houle (1996) described education as a *cooperative* rather than *operative* art that functions in a facilitative way. Rachal (2002) investigated concerns regarding learner control. Solomon (2001) observed that negotiated content and activities were integral to learner-centered pedagogy. According to Sgroi (1998) it is the students' responsibility to direct their own learning while Peters and

Armstrong (1998) referred to the teacher as a member of the group of learners, a participant in collaborative learning. Brookfield (2000) stated that learners and facilitators cooperate in the learning enterprise on curriculum, practices, and objectives.

In their careers today, these individuals are expected to take control in order to improve their workplace performance. They are *empowered*, *self-managed*, and integral to *reengineering* and *change* processes within their new *learning organizations*. Simply put, they are *involved* and *engaged*. As educators, developing and delivering e-learning courses for adult students, we can leverage the strengths that these students develop during their workdays. We can utilize them to enhance the e-learning environment and experience, for ourselves and our students. We can, to the greatest practicable extent, (a) involve them in the development and construction of the e-learning courses, (b) focus on learning rather than schooling, (c) empower students in our courses as they are empowered in their workplaces, (d) share our authority and control, (e) collaborate with students from development, through delivery, to evaluation, (f) incorporate self-directed learning, (g) facilitate rather than dictate, (h) negotiate course content and activities, (i) challenge students with heightened responsibilities, (j) engage learners, (k) increase our participation with them, and (l) cooperate with students all across our course timelines.

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