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Work-based Learning: bridging knowledge and action in the workplace

Joseph A. Raelin

San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2nd edition, 2008, 384pp., ISBN-13: 978-0-470-18256-7 (pbk)

The starting point for this book is the premise that the workplace is the natural location for learning, but that the process of learning through and at work does not necessarily come naturally. Raelin's objective is to show how the everyday work activities in which we engage provide the framework within which both individual and organisational learning can occur, and to explain the range of approaches which can be used to create a workplace learning environment.

This book provides a practical guide for those engaged in business development, primarily from the standpoint of organisational development professionals, but it will also be of interest to those public and private sector educators and trainers concerned with workforce development and the nature and potential of the workplace as a learning environment. It is not concerned with the practicalities of delivering work-based learning (WBL) programmes *per se*, rather with establishing and promoting the workplace as a legitimate and essential learning environment.

Raelin balances context, discussion and theory (Chapters 1-4) with practical explanation and guidance (Chapters 5-11), delicately seasoned throughout with wide-ranging examples and case studies which demonstrate the global application of the approaches described. Comprehensive notes and references are provided on a chapter by chapter basis and the index cross-references cited authors; however, a separate alphabetical bibliography of sources is not provided and this would have been a useful addition.

The first three chapters set out the stall for work-based learning (WBL), focusing primarily on the concept of group, or collective, learning as a strategy for organisational development. Raelin describes WBL as the 'engine' of organisational learning which provides the activities to feed and nurture a culture of learning in an organisation. Organisational learning is described in terms of a series of imperatives – it must be ongoing; it must at least keep

pace with and preferably exceed the rate of change; it must prevail if 21st century businesses are to survive and thrive. WBL is put forward as the mechanism which organisations can employ to meld theory, practice, knowledge and experience to solve problems and create solutions. Raelin contrasts traditional training with WBL with reference to an earlier study (Raelin, 1997) which identified nine 'flaws' in traditional approaches which he asserts are avoided or overcome through the adoption of WBL techniques. For example, the secondary advantage of networking and sharing experiences afforded by attendance at traditional training courses, whether internal or external, is contrasted with the primary, and indeed fundamental, role of such interaction in the learning cycle of WBL.

So what makes WBL work? Raelin asserts that work-based learners display certain characteristics: they tend to want a challenge, have commitment, are consistent in their beliefs and actions, are risk-oriented and naturally collaborative. Organisations that adopt WBL approaches tend to value collaboration over individualism, and have clarity with regard to mission and goals.

This section of the book concludes with a discussion of the role of leadership in the context of organisational learning, or to be more precise, Raelin's concept of collective leadership, which he refers to as 'leaderful'. This concept has four critical dimensions: it may be concurrent (more than one person leading a group at any time); collective (all members together); collaborative (giving and taking ideas for mutual benefit) and compassionate (endorsing diversity and non-conformity).

In summary, the case is made for WBL to provide the framework for organisations to capitalise on the learning that naturally derives from its activities, and to consciously structure activities in such a way as to ensure that learning is captured and shared for the benefit of individuals, teams and the organisation as a whole.

In Chapter 4, a theory of work-based learning is provided, which the author, interestingly, suggests readers may wish to skip! It is here that theory versus practice, explicit versus tacit knowledge, and individual versus collective learning is debated, and Raelin's four key components of WBL, three of which will be developed in detail in the ensuing chapters, are identified: applied science (representing the 'classic' approach to learning and not developed here); action learning; community of practice and action science.

From here on, the book enters practice mode, and the following chapters provide detailed explanation and guidance for practitioners, whether work-based or institutionally-based learning designers, or indeed work-based learners themselves, on using these three collective work-based learning approaches. The concept of 'learning teams' deriving from the working teams which engage in, for example, action learning or action science is introduced, and Raelin identifies the potential for these to evolve into communities of practice which can take forward the development and dissemination of learning beyond the life of the enabling task, further embedding and enhancing the learning culture with and across organisations. The merits and challenges afforded by technology in supporting the objectives of work-based learning initiatives and projects are also discussed, providing a new dimension to this updated edition.

Whichever specific approaches are adopted, the critical and defining characteristic of WBL is reflection on work practices, and the central premise of the book is addressed in Chapter 6, namely the critical role of what Raelin calls 'public' reflection in ensuring the effectiveness of work-based learning approaches. It is the shared nature of this activity in the organisational context which facilitates the corporate learning which is deemed to be the primary driver for engagement with WBL. The various methods of undertaking and capturing the outcomes of reflection are explored: journals, portfolios, the use of 360 degree assessment (apparently used by 29% of US firms) and internal and external mentoring/coaching relationships, and the pivotal role of the facilitator in supporting effective and meaningful reflection is discussed.

The final chapters focus on the operation of WBL in the context of action projects, approaches to evaluating the whole process and a range of case studies from across a wide spectrum of business and organisational types. These case studies indicate the diversity of situations in which WBL approaches can be used, and demonstrate their global application and potential.

Whilst *Work-based Learning: bridging knowledge and action in the workplace* is primarily a 'management' rather than an 'education' book, and as such does not directly address issues relating to the pedagogy of WBL, nonetheless it does provide the learning and teaching practitioner, and those educators concerned more strategically with engaging with employers, with a useful insight into the way organisations and employers are likely to think about the role of learning in the workplace. The detailed explanations of how work-based activities can be developed and how the learning deriving

from them can be utilised for the wider benefit of host organisations provide evidence, if it is needed, of the efficacy and value of formulating learning programmes in this way. Raelin himself gives only passing reference to the relationship between organisational WBL and academic assessment, and regards this as potentially problematic. But whilst this relationship may have its challenges, it is by learning and understanding more about the nature of work-based learning from the employer's perspective that the academy can apply its expertise and flex its approaches to respond to what, in the 21st century, is surely an imperative – to support organisations and individuals in getting the most out of their work endeavours, to genuinely recognise the intrinsic value of the learning that occurs in the workplace and work with employers to design training and learning interventions which capitalise on, and complement, existing work activities.

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fdf (Foundation Degree Forward)

Reference

RAELIN, J.A. (1997) Work-based learning in practice, *Journal of Workplace Learning*, vol.10, nos.6/7, pp.280-283.