

## Introduction to Work-Based Learning

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**ABSTRACT:** The work -based learning model of human resource development has captured a great deal of attention and has gained increasing importance in higher education in recent years. Work-based learning is a powerful phenomenon that attempts help policy-makers, managers and curriculum developers improve the quality of the decision an organizational behavior. This paper tries to clarify the experiences of a "work-based learning "project and training model for the professional development of decision and curriculum developers at the Ministry of Education. The case study method is used to examine the role of the work-based learning model as an effective scheme for the professional development of human resources, enrichment of decision practices, and improvement of organizational activities and environment of work-place. This study illustrates that the examination of the work-based learning model offers the possibility for Iranian decision-makers and curriculum developers to integrate work and learning at the workplace and help each other develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes required for changing workplaces.

**Keywords:** work-based learning, professional development, change management, work-based protect, learning organization

### INTRODUCTION

Today's world witnesses some profound and significant changes in various aspects of science and technology. Application of technology also requires gaining the relevant usage knowledge and know-how. Acquiring knowledge and science is a dynamic, non-stop process, the transition from one stage of which ends up to another .Thus lifelong learning is a new concept coined for an old already- existing and dynamic one, providing all learning opportunities in a newly devised framework, and presenting an innovative vision for educators.

Our prophet Mohammed, (peace be upon him) has stressed on the value of knowledge by recommending lifelong learning as a religious obligation. All- out focus of Islam on thinking and learning and surrounding world made a great change in the history of world thinking, bringing knowledge among ordinary propel, what was already confined to ivory houses of temples and churches.

It is noteworthy that despite the great value put on knowledge, thinking and education in Iranian culture, these concepts had not been widely spread among public. Following this introduction, the paper will now address the work- based learning as an essential tool and method in lifelong learning.

Our review on recent work (Petrick and Furr, 1995; Heaton and Lawson, 1996; Castling 1996; Weick and Quinn, 1999; sarkar Arani and Matoba, 2002; Tickle, 1987; Barth, 1990; Dean, 1991; Theissen, 1992; Imazu, 1996; Fueyo and Koorland, 1997; Adams and Hamm, 1994), suggests that one of the most

important things for human resource professional development is to conduct research into their own workplace with their own colleagues and workforces. This has been found to promote human resource self-renewal and continuous improvement in the quality of their efforts (Adams and Hamm, 1994; Harris et al, 1996).

Recent approaches to human resource development have centered more in workplace. They involve the workforce more directly in decision-making process, change management, informal learning in the workplace which shapes their productivity approaches (Garrick, 1998; 1992; CEBE, 2003). The work -based learning helps decision-makers to conceptualize the ways of improving both their professional effectiveness in their work and the relationships with their colleagues through work-place efforts and related activities (Garrick, 1998; Petrick and Furr, 1995; Tickle, 1987; Ashton et al, 1989; Graves, 1990; Smyth, 1995; Smylie, 1995). "Learning by doing" is a way through which teachers, curriculum developers and decision-makers can become engaged in significant professional development (Schön, 1987; Fish, 1989).

Work-based learning is a modern way of creating university level learning in the workplace. Its special work-linked features enable learning to take place and be centered on -the working environment. By using the actual role of the work-space and an organization's objective as the focus for academic enquiry, work-based learning is uniquely structured to benefit both the individual employee and the

employing organization (NCWBLP, 2003). As Center for Education in the Build Environment (CEBE) noted, "work-based learning is a subset of workplace learning. It refers specifically to the achievement of planning learning outcomes derived from the experience of performing a work role or function. It focuses on knowing how to; emphasizes often on learning and mentoring; emphasizes often on transferable skills and competences. It provides the students with the experience to carry out routine tasks effectively and to identify non routine or unpredictable situations; requires students to develop reflective skills, to reflect on their actions and to develop and refine their own conceptual models" (CEBE, 2003).

Therefore, work-based learning has a more significant effect on the development of the human resource competence and quality improvement of the organizational behavior than other types of training (Petrick and Furr, 1995; Garrick, 1988; Morant, 1981; Thiessen, 1989; Lunt et al., 1993; Darling-Hammond, 1998). The work-based learning approach provides a generic framework to which participating individuals bring the specific content of their own work and other life experiences (NCWBLP, 2003). The work-based learning program appeals to decision-makers' interests. It is responsive to their variability, and provides an opportunity of learning to interact with staff, building parental support for their work, and justifying ongoing decisions and actions on the basis of their research.

Work-based learning as a new higher education approach is as part of major changes influencing universities; including contributions of the pioneers of work-based learning; and it explores the changes in academic work practices associated with work-based learning (Boud and Solomon, 2001). The notion of work-based learning has captured a great deal of attention and has gained increasing importance in higher education and professional training in recent years. Many universities have strategic plans to design and deliver work-based learning course, center or unit. For example, the following quote, from the Vice-chancellor of Middlesex University, has been taken from his speech at the signing ceremony at the launch of the Bovis self-development program in partnership with Middlesex University: "...For Bovis it's an investment in intellectual capital, a leading example of university learning in the workplace. For Middlesex University it's part of our commitment to making learning accessible to people throughout their lives. The Bovis program achieves this and because it is work based it meets the needs of individual employees and the wider corporate objectives of the company. This is really what lifelong learning is all about and it is precisely what the university had in

mind when we established the national center of work-based learning partnerships (NCWBLP, 2002)."

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) is committed to the reduction of barriers to access higher education by taking the university into the workplace. It has also taken necessary action to the development of flexible learning processes in a wide range of disciplines. The provision of work-based qualifications is a major step towards meeting these commitments. The work-based course takes the learning program out of the university into the students' workplace. It does it through focusing student learning around projects undertaken in their workplace (School of Social, Community & Organizational Studies and the Work Based Learning Unit, UWS, 2000).

The Ministry of Education tries to change its cultural and structural organization through delivering in-service training opportunities to work-based learning in recent years. As Garrick (1998) reviews, recent studies of "the learning organization" (Senge, 1990 and 1994; Ford, 1993; Kasl, dechant and Marsick, 1993; Watkins and Marsick, 1993) have argued that effective and productive organizations have their special cultures that provide structured and active learning environments for employees at all levels (Garrick, 1998).

This is the one we believe has been overlooked and yet has the potential for significant impact; especially working can become site-based learning. In addition, the work-based learning has become useful in the learning society workplaces and many workplaces now seek to harness its productive potentials.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The case study method is used to examine the role of work-based learning model as an effective scheme for the professional development of human resources, enrichment of the decision practices, and improvement of organizational activities and environment of workplace.

The data presented in this paper come from our research project in the Ministry of Education , which is in charge of making policy, planning, delivering and reviewing education of all elementary and high schools in Iran. We have worked and conducted research in the Ministry of Education. We employed a case study method for data collection. Our approach involved the work-based learning program observations and interviews with advisors, coordinators, students and the examination of other relevant organization documents.

Interview and observational data were collected not only from students before and after their

participation in the work-based learning program, but also from the supervisor and the work-based learning coordinator during and after delivering and developing the program. In the interviews, students were asked to discuss their background and experiences in policy development, educational planning and research on curriculum development. In detail, students were asked to describe what had changed as a result of the work-based learning project relative to their professional development in general and their own workplace and organization behavior specifically.

## **RESULTS**

### Introduction to Work Based Learning

#### **1. Theme**

The theme of this paper is derived from the content of a specialized course by Western Sydney University of Australia, held in the Organization of Research and Curriculum Planning, Iranian Ministry of Education. 25 senior experts from various departments of the ministry including the Organization of Research took part in this specialized work-based course which was ranked as higher graduate program. The philosophy behind this work-based method is based on the following three principles:

Lifelong learning means that education and training is not confined to educational spaces and processes but an ongoing lifelong process. Universities and educational spaces should recognize and encourage this idea.

Work-based education is an authentic process in which group and individual experiences are recognized as part of an educational process and content, providing a bilateral link between learning environments (with their scientific methods and contents) and work places (with their practical methods and contents)

Recognition of prior learning; this means that universities should recognize individual learning acquired beyond educational institutions and authenticate them. On the other hand, we should not authenticate only university certificates issued under certain pre-fabricated frameworks.

#### **2. Definition of the work-based learning**

The rapid technical and industrial development at the outset of the 20th century and the formation of formal education at primary, secondary and higher education levels completely separated educational spaces from workplaces. Science was in fact shining at ivory houses of universities some rays of which reflected to the tough workplaces but the increasing need of universities and academics for employment of graduates, urged them to be familiar with workplace environments. However, authorities at workplaces

required some specific frameworks enabling them to further their studies without being isolated from their work environments.

Nowadays, at the threshold of the 21st century, consolidation of workplace and educational institutions is an effort to address the obstacles to higher education from one hand, and commitment to the development of flexible learning processes, from the other, are indications and achievements of work-based learning.

As an example of a work-based learning method, training is carried out at or outside workplace but not isolated from it. In this method, the emphasis is on education process rather than content. It means that learning process serves as a basis for work projects.

Work-based learning has the following advantages for both students and employers: Enables the students to make a balance between demand and their time-bound needs during their study and work. Learning is directly related to the student's jobs. Work-based learning project has a direct relation with the activities of the organization and employer. Students' learning can directly lead to the development of the organization.

#### **3. Content of work-based learning courses**

The content of these courses are devised in such a way that enables the students to develop their specialized skills, knowledge and expertise in close relation with theory and practice.

**3.1. Course subjects:** The curriculum development is oriented towards expected results and outcomes. Questions and problems arising from the work-based project as well as selection of the content and teaching material (to be incorporated with learning outcome of the course) will contribute to the establishment of a direct relation between theory and practice to instill expected results in participants and the relevant organizations

**3.2. Method of delivering the course:** The course is the combination of the following methods: Work-based projects to be implemented by the students. Limited workshops conducted by consulting professors, work-based learning coordinator and the participants. Homogenous group's sessions: These research sessions are conducted by work-based learning coordinator and internal homogeneous groups and individuals

**3.3. Work-based projects:** Work-based project is the core of training course which provides the ground for development, practice and intellectual work. The students discuss a work-based project with the consulting professors or work-based learning coordinator. The project should be a comprehensive one, based on problem scenario, enabling the

applicants to move towards problem- solving process. For example, the projects may include the following:

Devising, developing, implementing or evaluating a new program; Devising, implementing and reviewing efficient systems for monitoring the employees; Planning, reviewing and organizing a selection and education process; Devising a mechanism to review the implications of educational policies

### **3.4. Limited seminars**

The content of the seminar and the workshop will be the course subject. No distance education would be possible and the contents and elements of the course are directly delivered to the students at classroom .Seminars and workshops will be conducted by the academics and in case of unavailability, by eligible people.

### **The seminars fall into three categories:**

Project management sessions, analysis of the sensitive concurrent events, environment specific practices and project planning; Revision and analysis sessions; theoretical session and opinion poll; Guest speech session and other data

### **3.5. Homogenous groups study sessions:**

Work- based learning coordinator shall invite the participants to the regular homogenous groups meetings. These 2-3 hour meetings are held for sharing and comparing individual experiences as an internal network.

### **4. Assessment and Evaluation:**

Students will be assessed through the following procedures: project results, Project documentation

Background data development and evaluation during the academic year (including notes, questions on the research, documentation of the research process and analysis. The students are expected to document their learning process through various methods, defined as follows:

**4.1. Documentation and demonstration of the project:** Documentation and demonstration of the project is based on registration of the trends of activities during implementation process of the work-based project and includes: planning, implementing, difficulties and achievements.

Depending on the style of the project, documentation process may be in either of the following forms: Written (including reports, notes, policies, strategies and programs); Illustrative; Data gathering (interview, investigation); Literature review; Final product (an eclectic method, comprising all or some of the above-mentioned documents, may be used

**4.2 Domains:** Domains are formulated in the framework of the students' learning processes. In

order to assess the quality of the project a mid-term assessment is carried out during the one- year program and a final one at the end of the project. Types of assessable activities to be included in the domains are as follows:

**Discussing the reading material:** Taking notes about the concepts and what is being learned; Report on research activities; Other material, relevant to the project

### **5. The Role of work- based learning coordinator:**

Work- based learning coordinator (keynote speaker) assumes the following duties:

Assuring the access of nominees / applicants to educational resources and work- based learning process. Cooperation and assistance on consulting professors.

In- site problem- solving; Meeting the participants at workplace in order to help and assist them on implementing the work- based project; Monitoring the project, when needed: Organizing and holding group sessions and study courses; Holding limited seminars and workshops

### **6. Admission eligibility and recognition of the prior learning:**

Majority of those working in different fields have gained their basic knowledge and experiences through specialized development and training courses at their workplace. These people may not hold academic degrees. By recognition of the employees' prior learning, they are able to enter higher specialized courses.

This means that their prior learning and experiences may be evaluated in light of the relevant academic degrees. In which case, the satisfactory result enables the applicant to enter the course.

The students are assessed on the basis of their academic background, they are interviewed and are evaluated through some assessment criteria set within the past five years, by "work- based learning unit" of the university. We are of the conviction that the project is a graduate course enabling the employees to develop their potentials.

### **7. Course material**

The course material will be devised in a way to be relevant to the course and educational level of the students.

**7.1. Definition of the subject:** Definition of the subject provides an opportunity for implementing the complicated work- based projects the applicants will use the recommendations of their organizations, society as well as their clients. Work-based project will

be carried out through close consultation with consulting professors and the project coordinator.

### **7.2. Objectives**

At the end of each lesson the students will gain an understanding of the relations among theoretical approaches, presented in the course and the existing realities in their workplace. They will also learn about the client services and need-based response at local, organizational and global levels.

**7.3. Content:** The content of the course varies according to the nature of the project, organizational situation and individual people's capabilities.

**7.4. Evaluation:** Students' evaluation will be carried out according to their skills and knowledge gained from the implemented project at their workplace.

**7.4.1. Project result:** Written material (Reports, notes, policies and programs); Illustrative material; Data gathering (Interview, test); Literature review; Final product (Eclectic method may also be used); Demonstration and documentation may be carried out through the following means:

Written material (Reports, notes, Policies and programs); Illustrative material

Data gathering (Interview, test); Literature review; Final product (Eclectic method may also be used)

**7.4.2. Documentary reports:** Documentary reports will be compiled and be assessed during the course period. The content of the reports are: Analytical notes; Research questions; Documentation and demonstration; Sensitive analysis of events; Revision of the reading material; Literature review; Analytical notes; Research activity report; Other material (A midterm revision will be carried out during the one-year program, as a quality control strategy).

## **DISCUSSION**

It is possible to have a model of decision-makers and curriculum developers' competency on which the Ministry of Education. Is not only a place of work but also a source of professional development? The work-based learning project in Ministry of Education. Considers 'work' as a site of enquiry, as: recognition of prior competence, curriculum, basis for program design, reflection on implication of change, redefinition of learning, assessment and development. As Garrick (1998) noted, learning in the course of working seems to be a common sense that implies a 'curriculum', which exists in everyday activities. The on-going professional development of decision-makers is a very important area, which has real meaning. The Ministry of Education. Staff struggle to view professional development and enhancement of skills as a lifelong pursuit. They perfectly realize that

experience, self-study, self-directed learning, self-review and improvement critiques of their activities by their colleagues and self-reflection are important parts of this process. Rather than one-time workshops on the latest educational topics, they are engaged in a long-term process of self-reflection and development. Indeed, the best way of developing new skills and continuous change is to practice for interpretation, application and evaluation you and work environment in the workplace. As one of the most important outcomes of the work-based learning project in the Ministry of Education., it seems that the participants changed their sense of "work" as a new learning environment and "self" as a teacher.

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