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Innovation, Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning

Stephen Downes

Johannes Sauer asserts that innovation is unthinkable without lifelong learning and that innovation and lifelong learning are two sides of the same coin. But viewing lifelong learning as nothing more than continuing education, he argues, would be incorrect. The idea "that lifelong learning equals continuing education and 'continuing education as resumption of organised learning after a preliminary stage of education' must be regarded as too narrow" (Sauer 2011, p.3)

In this he is certainly correct. He offers his own evidence showing the rise of informal learning, use of informal learning, rather than formal training, in Germany. The "new in-house learning cultures is fully underway here and is vital for Germany," he writes. In my own work I have observed similar trends; the creation of MuniMall, for example, a resource site for the municipal sector in Alberta, Canada, tapped into the propensity of town managers and elected officials to learn informally through a network of communications with each other. (Stefanick and Lesage, Jr., 2005) And specialists in workplace learning such as Harold Jarche and Jay Cross have documented the rise, and pervasiveness, of informal learning. (Cross, et.al. 2010)

The limits of informal learning, writes Sauer, were shown in the integration process that followed German reunification. In such conditions of complexity and ambiguity, he writes, "Continuing education according to an academic paradigm and even a fourth pillar of the education system is neither adequate nor necessary in every case or sensible and efficient for coping with learning challenges in processes of social change." Or in other words, "you cannot teach someone how to live" (K. Elston 1996) and "nobody can be taught. You can only teach yourself." (Götz, Werner 2007)

It must be understood that such considerations do not entail the elimination of what we would call teaching activity. The verb ‘to teach’ is a success term, much like the verb ‘to heal’. It suggests that a series of activities with a successful outcome has taken place. Yet we would not describe the activities of the doctor by saying ‘the doctor heals’. This is only something that can be done by the patient. Rather, the doctor undertakes a series of activities which tend to lead to healing: diagnosis, prescription, operation, therapy, and the like. In a similar manner, those who ‘teach’ informally (which may include one’s own colleagues) conduct various activities that lead to learners being able to teach themselves: they describe, model, demonstrate, cajole, encourage, explain, show, and the like. The ‘teaching’ task remains, but is reconceptualized, while the formal structure of the continuing education course is eliminated. (Downes, 2010)

Those who learn informally, argues Sauer, work in very different ways than through traditional educational events. In particular, they ‘self-organize’ – that is, each manages his or her educational activity in concert with a network of colleagues or friends. This has an implication in the way informal learning is supported. "The structures need to be organised in such a way that self-organisation is possible," he writes. Organizing structures conducive to learning, and learning in a social environment, need to be in place. This typically involves the extension of use of information and communications technologies to support such self-organization. New reporting mechanisms for skills development need to be put into place. And training providers themselves need to be reorganized and retrained in this paradigm.

Traditional structures and tools are of little use in an informal learning environment, and may even impede progress. Instead of removing a learner from the work environment for ‘training’, for example, "the criterion of work being conducive to learning is therefore of major significance and key to the capacity for innovation and the transition to a knowledge society," argues Sauer. This echoes what is understood in constructionist and social constructivist theories of learning. One acquires the knowledge, values and world-view defined in a

discipline by immersing oneself in the activities of that discipline. This is totally contrary to the practice of removing oneself from the workplace to take part in formal classes. As Sauer writes, "(While) it is suggested that an increase in Germany's power of innovation is tied to the increasing numbers of participants and teaching hours, there is no academically funded research that supports this finding." (Sauer, 2011, p.9)

The support for workplace learning is an essential element in recruitment and retention. The danger of workplace learning, however, is the phenomenon of workplace stasis, the result created when learning is applicable only to one's current position. Hence, the organization of work conducive to learning must be forward looking. Sauer writes, "Conduciveness to learning needs to make sense and be useful both for the individual as well as for the organization (but) work conducive to learning is only forward-looking if it brings recognition on the one hand for the employees, increases businesses' capacity for innovation and adds up in terms of business management." Yet this is not a phenomenon limited to informal learning. Any system, of learning must support a learner's aspirations as well as his or her current position. This is especially the case for those who are unemployed or under-employed. "We need to accept that even workforces that do not possess any 'suitable' formal qualifications can become skilled employees"

Such considerations entail a conceptualization of informal and workplace learning that is not limited to the workplace. In other words, the requirement for the provision of informal learning is that participation in the learning community is not limited to those active in a discipline, but also open to those with aspirations to join the discipline. Such a model entails the opening of actual workplaces to observation and participation by those not currently employed. Such a mechanism would enable learners to learn through interaction with the community, and would also place them in a position where their progress and attainment would be visible to, and recognized by, those already active in the community.

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