

Collaboration in Workplace Literacy: A Case Study

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Abstract: A case study of collaboration in workplace literacy was conducted. The aim of the case study was to document and analyze how a university-industry joint program can be made to work through the use of collaboration as a strategy. The case studied was based on the Wisconsin Program Model that called for labor-management-education partnerships. The processes of collaboration among the three partners include initial meetings, partnership formation, planning meetings, implementation strategy meetings, workplace educational skills analysis, program implementation, and program evaluation. The use of collaboration as a strategy successfully integrates the following elements: partnership, involvement of key stakeholders, shared leadership, and contextual analysis. This case of Wisconsin workplace literacy education demonstrates how strategic leadership successfully deals with the issue of job-skills gap by using collaboration as a strategy. It also suggests how technical universities can take on the role of a leader ensuring a genuine collaboration between higher education and industry.

Keywords: collaboration, workplace literacy, Wisconsin Program Model, university-industry joint program

1. Introduction

Throughout the world and since their foundations, technical universities have shared one common mission: develop practice-based professionals especially in business and industry. In the 1900s, the technological revolution, namely computer science has rejuvenated workplaces and will continue to at its current dizzying pace in the 21st century. In such an information age as nowadays, educators must strive for a genuine collaboration between educational institutions and enterprises so that technical universities can carry on the fundamental mission and further reinforce the human resource development in business and industry.

The changing workplace has been demanding higher order skills of entry-level workers because of innovations in computer technology, robotics, and systems of authority. This growing phenomenon of the job skills gap has particularly initiated on-site workplace education programs in Wisconsin. The case studied was based on the Wisconsin Program Model that called for labor-management-education partnerships. The aim of this case study was to document and analyze how workplace literacy programs can be made to work through the use of collaboration as a strategy.

2. Essentiality of Workplace Literacy

The basic need For the individual worker, strong basic skills are the key to greater opportunity and a better quality of life. Workers with good basic skills find it easier to acquire more sophisticated skills, better jobs and higher pay. A strong foundation in basic skills enables workers to learn, problem solve and create—three key abilities for future jobs. In addition, a workforce with sound basic skills strengthens its employer's ability to compete.

The growing phenomenon: the job skills gap—“a mismatch between job demands and worker skills in the lower echelons of the labor market” [1, p. 144]. The changing workplace is demanding higher order skills of entry-level workers because of innovations in computer technology, robotics, and systems of authority. Chisman [1] points out, the “quality movement,” “just in time” delivery systems, and a focus on satisfying the customer have pushed decision-making authority down the chain of command, thinning out the ranks of managers and supervisors and making the worker on the line responsible for on-the-spot decisions and participation in teams of problem solvers.

3. The Wisconsin Program Model

One response to the rapid workplace changes in Wisconsin is the development of workplace education programs based on labor-management-education partnerships. On-site workplace education programs usually operate with the support of state and federal funds. The funding strategies are: in the first year of the funding the company shares 25% of the cost, in the second year, 50%, in the third year, 75%, and in the fourth year and beyond, 100%. In addition, many other workplace education programs are funded entirely by the private sector. Some companies would rather pay the cost themselves than get funded and deal with the red tape, according to Fallon, Coordinator of

Workplace Education in Madison Area Technical College [2].

The Wisconsin workplace partnership education programs are individually tailored to address the needs and concerns identified by the labor-management-education partners at each worksite. However, there are many commonalities among successful programs. For example, most effective workplace education programs provide contextually based workplace-specific, job-specific and general basic skills instruction. Besides, most programs are designed to enable employees to realize short- and long-term personal goals, while permitting employers to benefit from a workplace with higher skill levels and an improved competitive position.

4. Processes of collaboration

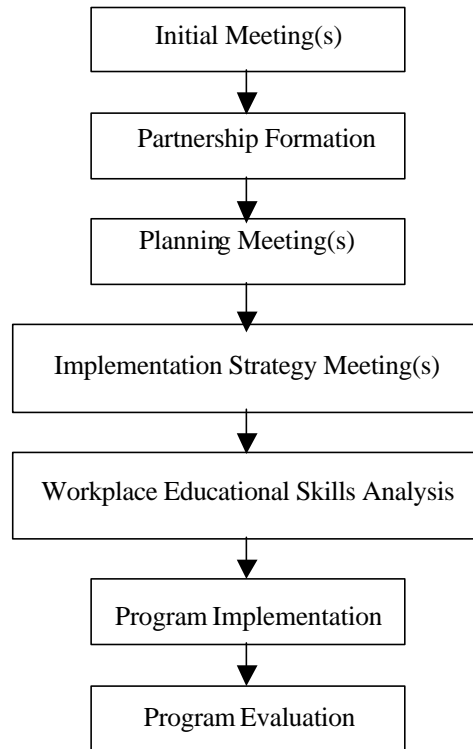


Fig. 1. Processes of collaboration

Workplace education programs often result from inquiries made to VTAE (Wisconsin Board of Vocational, Technical, and Adult Education) district technical colleges (e.g., MATC) by a representative of a local employer or labor organization. These inquiries are often spurred, as mentioned earlier, as a result of changes in the workplace such as advances in technology, methods or procedures.

During the initial meeting(s), the coordinator from MATC clarifies the role of education (MATC) in upgrading and renewing employee skills, discusses the commitment to on-site basic skills development and emphasizes the relationship between sound basic skills and occupational skills development. As well, she introduces and stresses the benefit of a local partnership approach to workplace education programs.

Once agreement is reached that a workplace education effort is needed, the coordinator suggests the formation of a labor-management-education partnership. This partnership among managers, employees, and educators is an integral component of the workplace education programs. While the responsibilities and contributions of the local labor-management-education partners vary from site to site, the active and ongoing commitment of each partner is essential to program success.

During the planning meeting(s), the local labor-management-education partners discuss labor-management program needs, workplace education program components and the roles and responsibilities of them. Involvement of each of the partners in this meeting is essential in order to prepare for the implementation of the workplace education program. A steering committee is established. Typically, it consists of one to three representatives from each of the local partners. Its activities usually include: 1) planning promotional activities, 2) identifying group instruction needs, 3) generating curriculum ideas, 4) providing technical expertise relative to curriculum development and other

program areas, 5) sharing program concerns and suggesting program modifications, 6) conveying in-depth program information to program (peer) advisors, 7) identifying methods to coordinate program activities with other management programs, labor initiatives and VTAE district services, and 8) proposing participant and program (peer) advisor recognition activities.

After the additional program needs information has been gathered and the other planning activities have been conducted, the next step is to hold an implementation strategy meeting. The purpose of the implementation strategy meeting is to finalize the program components and determine the implementation procedures. At this point, each program component is discussed in detail. These components include: partnership formation; policy development; the construction of an on-site education center; workplace educational skills analysis; program (peer) advising; program promotion; individualized and group-oriented workplace-specific, job-specific, and general basic skills instruction; participant assessment; and program evaluation.

WESA (Workplace Educational Skills Analysis) is a systematic process used to identify and analyze basic educational skills required on the job. Basic skills are identified in seven areas: computing, listening, problem-solving, reading, speaking, writing, and team building. The information gathered during this process enables workplace education instructors to develop job and workplace-specific curriculums; utilize workplace-specific materials in instruction; design competency-based participant assessment instruments; and assist employees with career planning. During this process, representatives of management and labor work with an educational skills analyst, who has background in Adult Basic Education, to identify the specific academic skills needed to satisfactorily perform current and future jobs. It is important to note that a focus upon the future as well as the present is necessary, due to the technological, methods-related and procedural changes occurring in today's workplace. The WESA process incorporated interview and observation methods; the collection of supporting documentation; the use of job-content or skill experts; and accepted educational, employment, and training procedures related to compiling available data for instructional materials. It typically is a six-stage process: 1) design meeting, 2) interview preparation, 3) interviews and observations, 4) data analysis and draft reports, 5) clarification meeting(s), and 6) final report(s). Usually, there is a time lag between the conduct of the WEAS and program implementation, since customization of materials and learning activities is a time-consuming process. However, the WEAS is one the preparatory activities which lays the foundation for the delivery of effective instruction.

The summative evaluation of program effectiveness is done by the employee-learners, the company managers, and the instructors by filling out a survey usually at the end of the funding year. Regular and periodic quantitative and qualitative evaluations are undertaken to measure program success in attaining objectives. Methods employed to develop the data used incorporate the use of: site monitoring visits; desktop evaluations using written reports from the education center supervisors, instructors, and peer advisors; and communications from the steering committee and worksite roundtable groups.

5. Indicators of Success

The labor-management-education partnership has developed better lines of communication through use of steering committees. Program planning, implementation, and evaluation are done *with* participants—not *to* them. Waiting lists of businesses interested in developing on-site learning centers are growing rapidly. Fallon [2] also pointed out, according to a report by the VTAE, that 635 of the participants stated they reached their own goals and 438 tested higher in communications skills.

6. Collaboration as A Strategy

The use of collaboration as a strategy, in my opinion, reflects a strategic leadership which “tends to be shared among stakeholders, and strategic planning is a procedure for encouraging such cooperation” and which “emphasizes collaboration to achieve implementation” [3, p. 11]. Specifically, in the field of adult education, as Knox [4] manifests, “Because of the voluntary nature of decisions by adult learners to enroll and persist, and by resource persons and experts to help adults learn, and by policy makers and others to allocate resources and contribute time and effort, a crucial administrative task is to win and maintain cooperation” [p. 37].

6.1 Partnership

In the Wisconsin workplace literacy education model, partnership is the key word. As the coordinator pointed out, “Program success is only possible when there is a strong commitment and partnership among management, labor, and education” [2]. The concept of partnership extends to all activities—all of the three sets of partners; managers, employees, and educators, work together to identify learning needs, set objectives, develop learning activities, and

do evaluations. The action is “an active partnership between the change agent (educational organization) and the leaders (managers) and learners (employees) in the target public in a collaborative effort to identify, assess, and analyze the learners’ needs and to develop an educational program or learning activities that are intended to help the learners meet those needs” [5, p. 117]. Working in partnership, that is, by interorganizational collaboration, “the parties involved share responsibility and authority for basic policy decision making” and it is a “model of joint planning, joint implementation, and joint evaluation between individuals or organizations” [6, p. 22].

6.2 Involvement of key stakeholders

One distinctive feature in the Wisconsin program model is the role of program (peer) advisors. Peer advisors recruit and motivate co-workers to participate in the program; act as public relations and marketing agents of the program; provide consultation to the partnership regarding curriculum development, career pathing opportunities and linkages with other, in-house training programs; and assists in guiding future program direction. Miller, Rossing, and Steele [7] suggest that successful programming which deals with serious issues can’t be a “my” program, but must be an “our” program. Therefore, when confronting such serious issues as the job-skills gap which “is not only disrupting the workplace but also threatening a lower standard of living for all Americans well into the next century” [1, p. 144], the government inevitably shares a stake in the case of workplace literacy education.

In fact, “it is the government that started encouraging the workplace literacy education,” said the coordinator. The National Workplace Literacy Program (federal grants) required partnership between businesses, industries, labor unions or private industry councils, and education organizations. No single organization could receive a grant. The mandated cooperative relationship among the partners was designed to be mutually beneficial. As Beder [8] emphasizes, “For collaboration to flourish the parties to it must tangibly benefit, and the key to benefit lies in a reciprocal relationship where both partners to collaboration exchange resources valued less for resources valued more” [p. 85]. In workplace literacy education, private sector partners were to draw upon the expertise of educators to provide work-based programs. Educators, in turn, could broaden and deepen their expertise as they dealt with specific work-based literacy requirements and became more familiar with the culture of businesses, industries, and unions [9]. As a result, I believe, the education organization obtains a wider domain—the sphere of influence in which an organization is legitimately empowered to operate, which is one of the essential resources for a continuing education agency’s survival [8]. To sum up, workplace literacy programs, particularly those under government funding, acquire input from key stakeholders and thus enhance their successes.

6.3 Shared leadership

Shared leadership is critical in a collaborative relationship. The establishment of the steering committee in this case is to share leadership among partners. Shared leadership helps the program jointly develop policies to adapt to changing conditions, such as layoffs. It sustains commitment to the program development, improves communication among partners, and serves as a forum for problem-solving. Shared leadership increases the program’s flexibility and survivability. Furthermore, in this case shared leadership is reflected on the intraorganizational collaboration (i.e., partnership between labor [employee] and management). Senge [10] cautions against the temptation of leaders to impose, top down, their own definitions of mission and vision (e.g., the initiative of workplace literacy program) on other members of the organization. He maintains that truly energizing mission statements tap significantly into the desires and aspirations of those numerous others who work side-by-side with the leader. To secure staff’s support, that is, administrators must adopt transformative leadership. As Bennis and Nanus [11] ascertain, “Leadership is the wise use of this power: Transformative leadership” [p. 17]. They believe a new leader “is one who commits people to action, who converts followers into leaders, and who may convert leaders into agents of change” [p. 3]. When staff is empowered they build a shared vision with administrators and it is this power—“the capacity to translate intention into reality and sustain it” [11, p. 17] that turns “their” program into “our” program.

6.4 Contextual analysis

For agency-level planning, especially for comprehensive and collaborative programs, contextual analysis is a parallel planning activity that helps specify societal influences along with resources and expectations of major stakeholders [3]. In this case, during the initial meetings, the coordinator meets with the representatives of a local employer or labor organization and specifically suggests the local partnership approach. This is the major stage for the coordinator (i.e., adult education agency) to scan educational opportunities and threats in the external environment of the agency. For example, if the program is government funded, the coordinator focuses on the

assurance of the company's readiness in a way that the company adopts a more decentralized structure so that the employees become equal partners. On the other hand, when the company itself pays for the program, the assessment of the possibility of the partnership approach becomes the focus. As a result, the coordinator makes more effort to persuade, negotiate, and perhaps compromise.

The specific use of Workplace Educational Skills Analysis methodology is, in my view, a part of contextual analysis. The WESA functions as a "literacy audit" in which an educator analyzes the literacy "demands" of the work environment [1, p. 30]. Through interviews with both the manager and the employee as well as observations in the workplace, the education organization confirms or clarifies the learning needs previously identified by the company. Also, a detailed WESA report is designed to provide the on-site instructor with specific job-related basic skills information regarding occupations at the worksite. This information is to be used in the development of contextually based curriculum, instructional materials, competency-based participant assessment instruments, career planning materials and orientation tools for the instructor and employee-learner. Moreover, not only does the WEAS emphasize the present, but also a focus upon the future is strengthened, due to the rapid change in today's workplace.

7. Conclusion

For technical universities to carry on the fundamental mission of developing practice-based professionals in business and industry, a genuine collaboration between educational institutions and enterprises is a must. Even though reflecting the inevitable time-consuming nature of collaboration, the case of Wisconsin workplace literacy education has demonstrated how strategic leadership successfully deals with the issue of job-skills gap by using collaboration as a strategy. For a university-industry *joint* program to be successful, I suggest that the university accordingly adopt strategic leadership. A strategic leader is a *synergistic* one, as Knox [3] reveals:

Strategic leadership for adult education agencies that participate in comprehensive programs [such as workplace education] is synergistic because it affects decision making and releases energy by various stakeholders. It is thus especially important that strategic leadership formalize and make explicit the decision-making process to gain agreement on goals and encourage contributions toward their achievement. Such leadership entails effective communication among stakeholders and agreement on policy guidelines, along with supportive guidance, feedback, encouragement, and the recognition that is essential for cooperation. [p. 472]

When technical universities act as strategic or synergistic leaders, they can not only ensure an authentic collaboration between higher education and industry, but also truly help develop *real time* functionally literate employees at a given rapid changing workplace.

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