Enhancing Self-directed Learning in New Professionals

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This paper provides Human Resource Development practitioners several methods for enhancing learning projects of new professionals preparing for certification or licensure. Implementation of these activities provides opportunities for new professionals to become more self-directed and therefore immersed in their own learning. While these activities are usually seen in the academic environment, each is readily adapted to Human Resource Development and will assist new professionals in becoming more self-directed in their professional development.

Keywords: Self-Directed Learning, Initial Professional Education (IPE)

Classes are over, the walk across the stage complete, and professional status is granted. But where is the newly crowned professional to go now? The time between graduation and licensure/certification can take months, but the profession does not stand still; procedures change, laws are enacted, and new technology is introduced. So how can we as human resource development (HRD) practitioners prepare new professionals for a constantly changing career role?

Developing self-directed learning skills while preparing for licensure or certification is one method for assisting new professionals in preparing for their future is to help them understand the need for continuing their professional education both before and after licensure. In addition to assisting new professionals in their professional studies, self-directed learning may enable new professional practitioners become better prepared for their chosen careers.

Why Self-Directed Learning Is Important

During a presentation regarding accreditation within The American College of Surgeons (ACS), the speaker (Johnson, 2004) indicated that self-directed study was now an accepted method for physicians to obtain continuing professional education credits. As more opportunities outside of formal classroom training and conference attendance have become available to members, the need to acknowledge these non-traditional forms of learning has gained in importance to ACS. Previously Confessore and Confessore (1994) reported on two continuing professional education projects of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada and the American Institute of Architects Continuing Education System (AIA/CES) that identified self-directed learning activities were being used to meet the professionals' need to improve their practice in areas not directly provided by traditional continuing professional education (CPE) programs. Other professional organizations are also reviewing methods for documenting and credentialing the learning of their members that occurs outside the traditional methods of formal courses and conference symposiums. For example, the Project Management Institute® (PMI), an international professional organization, has within its organization a group that reviews and certifies outside vendors to provide continuing professional education to members. While the majority of the venders provide traditional classroom workshops, members do have access to programs that are non-traditional and are approved by PMI for members to obtain CPE units. These non-traditional programs rely on members to be self-directed in their execution of the learning program.

These reports indicate traditional forms of continuing professional education are not meeting the needs of all professionals and other delivery forms for learning are needed to fill the gap between what is currently available to professionals and what professionals say works for them in their individual situations. It is apparent that self-directed learning is one method of learning that has the potential to meet professionals' needs (Johnson, 2004). As more methods become available for delivery of continuing education, such as CD-ROM, internet access, distance learning, etc., the need to be self-directed in the learning process is imperative for busy professionals. An increasing ability to access continuing professional educational programs outside of the formal context is a major reason for new professionals to become self-directing in their professional education. Hiemstra (1994) stated, "… adult educators have shown how non-traditional programs, distance education, and self-directed learning efforts can meet many challenges associated with keeping current on constantly changing knowledge." The rapid change in technology as avenues for continuing professional education opportunities, the increase in virtual learning

environment offerings, and time and cost commitment of traditional CPE training each provide reasons for HRD practitioners to encourage and enhance the new professional's self-directed learning abilities.

Defining Self-Directed Learning

If HRD practitioners are to assist new professionals in developing their self-directed learning, then an understanding of the definition of self-directed learning is required. Current literature identifies and defines both a process of self-directed learning and the attributes a learner exhibits as a self-directed learner leading to confusion for the HRD practitioner. In this article, it is the pre-professional's attributes of self-directed learning that are of interest. Brookfield (1986), Long (1994), and Straka (1999) identified self-directed attributes as developing goals for learning, controlling the learning task, determining learning methodology, monitoring and evaluating progress towards goals, and determining the value of learning tasks in relation to personal and professional skills and knowledge. What is common among the definitions is the requirement for the learner to act, not react; to control learning, not be controlled; and to pursue knowledge, not be fed information. Key to understanding and facilitating self-directed learning is recognizing that in the role of a self-directed learner, the learner takes on aspects of the traditional role of teacher. The learner takes control of the learning situation to include where, when, what, and how new information is to be incorporated into new knowledge.

Preparing New Professionals for Self-Directed Learning

Before new professionals can be expected to manage their own continuing professional education after licensure or certification, it is incumbent upon HRD practitioners to provide them with opportunities to develop self-directed learning skills as they prepare for licensure/certification. The need to learn outside of practice is reported by Confessore and Confessore (1994), "learning from practice is only a small part of the change [in knowledge and skills] physicians report" (p. 35). If new professionals are to obtain the greatest benefit from learning outside of on-the-job training or practical experience, then HRD practitioners will need to assist new professionals in becoming self-directed learners while preparing for their licensure/certification. The HRD practitioner will need to take from the academic setting those skills and applications for self-directed learning and adapt them to the organizational setting. The skills of learning contract development, journaling, and study circle participation being used in the classroom can be adapted by HRD practitioners to enhance self-directed learning in new professionals. Within the organization, HRD practitioners can implement learning contracts that support the organization's mission and job requirements in conjunction with the new professional's personal and professional goals and further enhance the learning experience by including opportunities for journaling and study groups within the new professional's work group.

Learning Contracts

The use of learning contracts in the classroom to encourage self-directed learning has increased since their introduction by Tough (1971) in his work on adult learning projects. Smith (1980) saw the benefit of learning contracts "especially when increased competence is the aim. On such occasions learning contracts provide a means for reconciling individual initiative and commitment with the expectations of others—employers or supervisors, for example" (p. 99). By developing the new professional's use of learning contracts, HRD practitioners will be able to help develop a skill the new professional can utilize when learning needs are extensive or the new professional has little knowledge of the subject matter.

In his discussion of learning contracts, Hiemstra (n.d.) provides a checklist for completing a learning contract. This list can be used by HRD practitioners to identify the reasons why the learning contract is important to the new professional. Hiemstra starts with "diagnosing learning needs" to identify the "gap between where you are now and where you want to be in regard to a particular set of competencies." For a new professional still in training, the decision about what to learn is often made by others. Knowledge and skill identification can be planned with the assistance of a supervisor or knowledgeable peer to help the new professional devise a strategy and set goals for attaining the new skill or knowledge. During the process of developing a learning contract, the HRD practitioner may provide a list of skills the organization has identified that are needed by new professionals. This list can be used as the new professional decides what learning, skills, or knowledge is required to improve his or her practice. Additionally, some organizations may have planned learning and assessment modules that new professionals might use to identify the various paths their learning might take. With the assistance of a HRD practitioner and based on the organization's needs, the learning contract enables new professionals to set their own time frame for accomplishment of their goals and provides an opportunity to establish evaluative measures needed to validate the skill or identify when the knowledge is attained. Hiemstra noted, "By participating in the process of diagnosing

personal needs, deriving objectives, identifying resources, choosing strategies, and evaluating accomplishments the learner develops a sense of ownership of (and commitment to) the plan" (n.d., <u>Why Use Learning Contracts?</u>).

Ownership of the process and content identification in a learning contract is indicative of self-directed learning. The use of learning contracts in the workplace may aid new professionals throughout their careers as they encounter the need to improve their practice through new skills or knowledge. Understanding the evaluative step in the learning contract and identifying evaluation measures for those skills or attributes that signify the skill or knowledge has been acquired will help the new professional later in his or her career when selecting whether to use either traditional or non-traditional learning experiences for continuing their professional education. How to determine learning needs is a critical step in becoming a professional and a self-directed learner. This does not mean the diagnosis or assessment of learning needs should take place in solitude, but the process be made in conjunction with inputs from peers, supervisors, or managers. While Hiemstra (n. d.) provides an additional eight steps to complete the learning contract, the first step is critical for new professionals to learn while still undergoing training. Mastery of this skill will enable the new professional to identify the information that is of greatest value to his or her career and is also valued by the organization. The HRD practitioner is well situated within the organization to provide training and oversight of this key element of self-directed learning in new professionals.

Journaling

Some new professionals will have experienced journaling in the higher education environment. However, many will only have experience in the area of personal diaries and no experience with journaling for professional reasons. The content of any journal at this stage of development is typically a recording of observations and not an in-depth exploration of the thoughts, emotions, or decisions behind the observed behavior. HRD practitioners can help new professionals in their journaling efforts by identifying motivating factors within the organization that will encourage the new professional to maintain a professional work journal. Dyment and O'Connell (2003) have identified several methods for keeping journaling interesting and relevant to the current learning task and their suggestions may improve the quality of the new professional's journaling activities. "Learning something that is new or different, and then reflecting on what that means for a current or expected professional position, can be an important outcome" (Hiemstra, 2001, p. 20). For the new professional, the need to question and critically reflect on one's thoughts, emotions, and decision-making processes is necessary for developing self-directed learning behaviors that will enable him or her to continue to increase the skills and knowledge of the profession.

Hiemstra (2001) also cited other benefits of journaling such as personal growth and development, intuition and self-expression, problem solving, and reflection and critical thinking. Recent literature (Dickson, 2002; Dyment & O'Connell, 2003; Smith, 1980) has enumerated these and other benefits of journal writing. HRD practitioners can provide the new professional with an understanding of the benefits of journal writing and encourage journaling in the context of the profession. Professional growth and development comes as a result of acknowledging one's thoughts, emotions, and decisions about what is happening in his or her professional life. Keeping a professional work journal may result in a better overall understanding of professional goals and aspirations. Over time, as the new professional continues to journal and review earlier observations, new perspectives may emerge allowing for recognition of solutions to problems. Last, reflection and critical thinking leads to value clarification and "… developing wholeness as a professional through critical judgments enhance not only the professional but also the profession" (Hiemstra, 2001, p. 24). Enabling the new professionals to explore their thoughts through the process of journaling may enhance their overall understanding of their profession and their role in it.

Dickson (2002) provides an excellent example of a work journal and reports how journaling enabled her to take a step back from what was happening at work and look critically not only at how she reacted to a situation, but how she felt, what she thought at the time, and how she responded. By writing down the experience, Dickson was able to analyze her role in creating the situation and how she could avoid a similar situation in the future. While this example may not be the starting point for a work journal, it does provide a look at a benefit outside the learning task a new professional could gain from journaling in the workplace. Since journaling is personal to the individual, HRD practitioners are in a position within the organization to respond and provide guidance to the new professional's concerns outlined in the work journal.

Study Circles/Groups

In preparation for the doctoral qualifying exam, a major mid-western university's College of Education (NIU, n.d.) recommends the use of study groups. As a member of a small group of my peers, the value of the study group was evident in the depth of knowledge gained from discussions with two other individuals. The value of discussions with peers was identified by Confessore and Confessore (1994), "… change through learning among physicians involves reading, discussions with colleagues, and involvement in formal continuing professional education programs, in that order. Similar distributions of learning activities are reported for several professions" (p.35). This

implies that formal and informal conversations among peers are more valued than learning provided by formal continuing education programs.

As identified in the beginning of this section, the value of study circles/groups is recognized by graduate schools as beneficial to the attainment of success in the graduate programs. Hellyer & Schulman (1989) reported the Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen Union experimented using Swedish study circle discussions to "… increase interest and understanding of the union, its plans and its context" (p. 580). The pre experiment was so successful; the union planned on increasing the availability of study circles to other members of the union. Cookson (1989) also identified the use of Swedish study circles by the Kettering Foundation to educate workers in North America. Various themes on the study circle/group can be seen in cooperative education, library reading circles, museum interest groups, and other non-traditional educational formats (Brookfield, 1986). The study group mentioned above that was established for the purpose of exam preparation has evolved into a study group that provides in-depth discussion of various topics of concern to each member's educational journey. As a result of the group's metamorphosis, a splinter group was established to specifically address scholarly writing and research. This demonstrates that the breadth of variations on the learning circle lends to its adaptability and credibility in numerous learning activities and contexts.

While there is no one way to implement a study circle, the process used by my study group was very informal. An initial decision was made to address questions by members of the group as they came up in discussion. This led to a freeform style of study which in hindsight managed to cover areas of concern for each member without being formal in its application. No one member was considered an "expert" in all areas, but each voiced his or her own version of understanding to the group. As each individual understanding of a subject was discussed, an overall broad and in-depth understanding was developed as the group continued its efforts over a two month period.

Implementation

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The process of establishing a study group identified above could be implemented by HRD practitioners with the organization's new professionals as group members. The starting point for the group's discussion can be based on the learning contracts developed for each new professional. As specifics of the learning contracts become known, smaller groups with a common learning need may be established. Within each of the subject-specific learning groups, questions and reflections identified in the individual new professional's learning journal will provide the context and content for the group's discussions. By sharing questions and personal understandings of the subject matter, the new professional is exposed to a broader knowledge base than when learning is conducted independently. Should clarifying information be needed by the group of new professionals, HRD practitioners should provide the group with a list of the organization's subject matter experts (SMEs) who are willing to work with the study group at the group's request.

Implementing study groups for new professionals based on the learning needs identified in their learning contracts, providing time and meeting space during the work day, and identifying SMEs the groups can consult with for clarification will enable the new professional to better understand his or her role within the organization and be better prepared to meet the requirements of licensure or certification.

Conclusions

Roth (2004) challenges HRD practitioners to look beyond the "boundaries" of traditional HRD practice to identify areas of commonality with continuing professional education and workforce development. One area of theory and practice common to all three is adult education. The underlying reason for providing education or training is unimportant for this discussion. What is of importance to HRD, CPE, and workforce development is the need to provide opportunities in the workplace that will enhance the self-directed learning attributes of new professionals.

Studies have shown the value of using learning contracts (Hiemstra, n.d.; Smith, 1980; Tough, 1971), journals (Dickson, 2002; Dyment & O'Connell, 2003; Smith, 1980), and study groups/circles (Brookfield, 1986; Cookson, 1989; Hellyer & Schulman, 1989); little research has been done using all three techniques together to enhance self-directed learning. HRD professionals can conduct research in the workplace to determine the value of using learning

contracts, journals, and study groups in conjunction with preparation for licensure/certification by new professionals.

Guglielmino and Guglielmino (1994) foretold of the future of the workforce and the need for employees to be self-directed. As business and organization training dollars become more scarce, the use of training delivery systems other than formal classroom training will increase. The professional who is self-directed in meeting his or her learning needs will have greater access to new skills and information than the person who relies solely on others to identify, schedule and provide skills training. Therefore, it is imperative that HRD practitioners provide an environment and activities in the workplace that new professionals can use as they develop their professional knowledge and skills.

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