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Research Report

Bridging the Gap: The Use of Learning Partnerships to Enhance Workplace Learning

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This paper examines the use of peer learning strategies and in particular learning partnerships, in a training program. Learning partnerships in this context are "learning relationships involving occasional meetings in which students support each others learning." (Sampson & Cohen, 2001, p. 40). They attempt to stimulate, promote and engage individuals in effective problem solving, reflection and other forms of higher order thinking with their partners. Learning partnerships are traditionally employed in higher education to support student learning and usually involves one to one interactions. However in this program, learning partnerships and allied strategies were embedded to help participants extend and apply their skills in 'learning how to learn'. The intention was that once these skills were developed, participants would be better equipped to transfer their learning into the workplace. The research analyses the level of success of the learning strategies employed, especially the use of learning partnerships in the transfer of learning to the workplace. (Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 2005, 6(2), 7- 16).

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There are many challenges facing organizations as we enter the 21st Century. Some of these challenges are globalization, which is "changing the way enterprises are managed and work is performed" (Burns, 2002, p. 3). There is an increasing pressure to be responsive and competitive in a global market. Other challenges include technological change, rapid knowledge obsolescence and changing organizational structures and work patterns. "We are moving into a world that is complex, unpredictable, network based, horizontally integrated, information rich and largely beyond our control" (Burns, 2002, p. 22).

Tennant (2000) believes that "the contemporary workforce needs to be clever, adaptable and flexible" (p. 123). Workers need to develop new skills to meet the challenges of change within their organizations. Burns (2002) has suggested these skills include "the ability to communicate and work in a group context, the ability to know how to learn, resourcefulness and problem solving skills" (p. 23).

Education and training practice also needs to be flexible in order to meet the needs of organizations and their employees. Burns (2002) suggests that this is not the case and that education and training has failed to develop at the same pace as the workplace environment.

> While it is unlikely that a surgeon from a hundred years ago could walk into an operating theatre in today's world and set to work, there is no doubt that a teacher from a hundred years ago could walk into a modern classroom and pick up the chalk and carry on (p. 22).

However, the kind of formal learning that takes place outside the workplace, in classrooms at universities or technical colleges, is recognized as only one component of learning. Foley identifies informal learning as another important part of learning in the workplace. This involves what is learnt on the job through experience where the "practitioner acts, reflects on the action and, learning from the reflection, plans new action." (Foley, 2004, p. 11). Much of the informal knowledge is tacit knowledge, and Foley suggests that one of the roles of adult education and training is to find ways to make tacit knowledge explicit.

Resnick (1987, p. 17) suggests one way of making tacit knowledge explicit is through "bridging apprenticeships". This kind of training involves the use of simulations, tutoring, coaching and case-based teaching to contextualize the learning and make it more relevant to what happens in the workplace. In addition, Resnick argues that special skills in 'learning how to learn' need to be included to make bridging apprenticeships succeed.

This research is positioned within the field of adult education which is founded on the proposition that adults

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have particular learning needs (Foley, 2004; Houle, 1972; Jarvis, 2002; Knowles, 1980; Rogers, 2001). One of these needs is that adults like to learn in "collective ways as well as independent, self-reliant modes" (Caffarella, 2002, p. 29) which is why peer-learning can be an effective strategy for adults. Research suggests that peer learning benefits students in higher education in areas such as working with others, critical inquiry and reflection, managing learning and how to learn (Boud, 2001). Research also suggests that peer learning can motivate students, help with the creative generation of new ideas and develop the skills required in the community and the world of work (Adams & Hamm, 1966).

This paper examines the use of peer learning strategies and in particular learning partnerships, in a training program that could be described as a bridging apprenticeship. Learning partnerships are "learning relationships involving occasional meetings in which students support each others learning." (Sampson & Cohen, 2001, p. 40). They attempt to stimulate, promote and engage individuals in effective problem solving, reflection and other forms of higher order thinking with their partners.

Learning partnerships are traditionally employed in higher education to support student learning and usually involves one to one interactions. However in this program, learning partnerships and allied strategies were embedded to help participants extend and apply their skills in 'learning how to learn'. The intention was that once these skills were developed, participants would be better equipped to transfer their learning into the workplace. The research analyses the level of success of the learning strategies employed, especially the use of learning partnerships in the transfer of learning to the workplace.

Context of the Research

The authors are involved in an ongoing, long-term research project that focuses on the effectiveness of peer-learning, and in particular the use of learning partnerships in adult education. They are investigating whether learning partnerships can encourage and improve learning in the workplace. The results of the research to date, reported in this paper, are based on an intensive training program delivered to 300 employees of the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) from October 2003 to June 2004. The participants were trained in groups of approximately 25 in various cities around Australia for 10 days over a number of weeks. Learning partnerships formed an integral part of this program.

The subjects of the research, the nature of the sample and the context of the research, are all important factors that need to be considered. These factors impact on the relevance of certain observations and conclusions drawn from the research and influence how far these findings can be generalized to other learning contexts. It is necessary therefore, to provide some background information on this project.

The ATO is a large organization, which employs approximately 22,000 people Australia wide (21,718 at 30 June 2003 per ATO Annual Report 2002-03, p. 221). Approximately 1,500 of the 4,000 employees working at Australian Public Service 6/Executive Level 1, a relatively senior ranking within the ATO, are compliance officers. It is these compliance officers that comprise the target group for the training program (3,998 APS 6/EL1 at 30 June 2003, ATO 2002-03, p 222).

The workforce is divided into what are referred to as lines. These lines signify an individual's function within the organization. There are 20 lines within the ATO overall; 6 of them are 'business lines'. Compliance officers work within the business lines which are either specific to a type of taxpayer (for example, small business) or a type of tax (for example, excise). The workforce gender profile is approximately 52% women and the age profile of staff is approximately 58% being 40 years old or older (ATO 2002-03, p. 226).

A statement of requirements (an invitation to tender) was released by the ATO for the training of compliance officers (i.e. tax auditors) currently working with taxpayers in the field. The training was to be delivered to a mix of compliance officers with either: limited experience but who have had formal technical training; or extensive experience without formal training or recent education on auditing and related topics.

The statement of requirements clearly specified that the training would not be technical in nature (i.e., focused on tax laws) but would be predominantly about acquiring what might be referred to as tacit knowledge or what is colloquially known as 'nous' (Benner, 1984; Polanyi, 1972). The training program had to include the kind of knowledge that is usually developed through lengthy job experience so as to enable less experienced officers to manage work in a faster, smarter way (Gibb, 2002). One of the ways this was to be achieved was through the experienced compliance officers sharing their accumulated work experience with those who were less experienced. This ensured that skills learnt on the program were relevant to the participant's work context and could be transferred directly back into the workplace.

There was also an expectation that the participants should not only share experiences, but should learn how to use other workers as a continuing learning resource. In other words they were using other people to learn how to learn more effectively.

In essence, the training program we developed could be described as a "bridging apprenticeship", as defined by Resnick (1987, p. 17). The program included contextualized learning and had a particular focus on skills for learning how to learn.

The Project

Atax, the tax school within the Faculty of Law at the University of New South Wales, won the contract to provide the training program to the ATO, and employed a number of subcontractors with expertise in the various areas required. Jacqui McManus a Senior Lecturer in tax law with Atax was appointed Technical Director of the project. She has coordinated the design and delivery of the whole program and presented the introduction to the program to participants. Kate Collier, Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at University of Technology Sydney was employed as an additional trainer by 'Learning By Design'. This specialist consultancy firm focused on the education aspects of the program. In particular, 'Learning By Design' was responsible for designing and delivering aspects of the course that related to the development of communication skills and the transfer of learning to the workplace.

The training program was developed through extensive consultation with the ATO. The final product involves 10 days of training delivered over two weeks with a two week break between training delivery weeks. A range of topics are covered. In most cases one or two days are dedicated to a particular topic and a different facilitator, specializing in that field, works with the group on those days.

It was agreed that the number of participants in any one training group would be restricted to 25. In order to cover the numbers required in the very short time frames specified, two groups (usually in different cities) were trained at one time. Consequently two facilitators specializing in the same field were needed to deliver the training concurrently.

The number of presenters who delivered the program had a significant effect on the way the learning was conducted. The implications of this will be discussed later in the research findings.

The pilot program began with 100 participants in what was referred to as Wave 1. This training took place from October to December 2003. A second group of participants, referred to as Wave 2, were trained from February to June 2004. There were 206 participants in that group.

Planning the Curriculum to Meet the Needs: Why Peer Learning was Integrated into the Training Program

The program needed to include strategies that would help participants see the relevance and apply what they had learnt to their workplace. Additionally, the course needed to assist participants 'unpack' their experience and tacit knowledge and make it explicit (Grundy, 1987) so they could pass their learning on to others.

Learning strategies such as case studies and group discussions of participant's 'war stories' were included in the program to address these needs. Tennant (2000) suggests that: "While it is true that the totality of experience cannot be taken on by others, experiences can nevertheless be talked about, compared, theorized and problematized" (p. 130).

However, Tennant (2000) also recognizes the limitation of 'off the job training' because as the argument goes, "the only indicator that knowledge is produced is one's performance" (p. 130).

It was this need to bridge the gap between the knowledge learnt in training 'off the job' and at the workplace that stimulated the development of a series of peer learning strategies to underpin the more traditional content of the training program.

There are many interpretations of what constitutes peer learning. Boud (2001, p. 3) admits that peer learning is an 'abstract' concept that is hard to define precisely (see also, Falchikov, 2001). However, he does identify one important characteristic of this approach, that peer learning should be 'a two way, reciprocal learning activity' (Boud, 2001, p. 3). It is this idea of participants working as equals to help each other understand the material being presented in the training program and having time to consider and record its relevance to their workplace that informed the design of the structured learning component of the curriculum for this project. Therefore learning partnerships which involve 'a relationship in which a student purposively plans, learns and reflects with a peer of his or her own choice' were chosen as the key learning approach for this program (Robinson, Saberton & Griffin, 1985).

Boud (2001) suggest that learning can be reinforced and deepened through the use of peer learning. Peer learning builds upon and gives structure to the informal kinds of learning that people engage with in their everyday lives but also reflects the work practices they will be expected to engage in. For example, learning can occur when someone asks a colleague in the workplace to help them understand how to use a new computer program or shows them how to operate the office photocopier. These informal encounters, according to Boud (2001) usually involve "the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience of colleagues" (p. 3).

The peer learning strategies adopted in the training program were:

- The setting up of learning partnerships
- Putting aside 30 minutes at the end of each day for learning conversations with learning partners, and
- The requirement that each participant keep a form of learning journal.

Learning partnerships, learning conversations and learning journals provided a framework for participants to reflect on their learning throughout the course and make their understanding explicit through discussions with others. These strategies also raised awareness of how individuals could learn, with the assistance of others, back in the workplace.

Participants were encouraged to set up learning partnerships back in the workplace. The driving force behind the introduction of and continued use of learning partnerships was the ATO's desire in their training requirements to develop what was described as a 'learning culture' amongst the staff of the ATO.

Delivering the Program: How Learning Partnerships Were Used

In the pilot (Wave 1) program participants were asked to set up learning partnerships on day 1 and were provided with some brief information on what learning partnerships were and their value as a strategy to support learning. The importance of reflection in the peer-learning process was highlighted and a model that illustrated how to approach reflective practice was presented to participants. The importance of learning partnerships and the place of reflection in learning were further reinforced through the written materials which were provided to participants in advance. The key features of learning partnerships as described by Sampson and Cohen (2001) were presented to the participants as a guide. The key features are that:

- Partners are self-chosen
- There is regular contact at mutually convenient times
- Learning agendas are negotiated
- Set readings are discussed, partners engage with concepts and try out ideas
- Class sessions are reviewed
- Partners give reciprocal feedback to each other on assignment writing
- Content is related to their own experience
- Different perspectives and interpretations are made explicit, and
- Partners provide mutual support for each other.

Participants were also given a brief overview of some of the communication skills that would help them establish and maintain productive learning partnerships. Only a short time was allocated for the practice of these skills but detailed notes were provided on all these communication areas in the materials provided to participants.

Thirty minutes was set aside for learning conversations at the end of each of the ten training days. Learning partners were instructed to use this time to discuss the learning that had taken place during the day and consider how they could transfer what they had learned to their workplaces.

The learning conversation model adopted for the training program was based on one described by Saunders (1999). There are some differences between the model Saunders presents and the one the training program adopted. The key difference is the status of the participants. Saunders describes conversations as taking place between a novice and an expert. In the training program conversations are conducted between equals because this is an essential element of the learning approach.

Saunders's (1999) description of learning conversations being simultaneously collaborative and challenging does reflect the aims of learning conversations set up in the training program:

> The learning conversation enables people to enhance their learning about theory and practice in their professions (and their relationships) by providing an opportunity to share ideas, identify and test assumptions, demonstrate mutual respect and achieve a balance between support and challenge. People are able to share rather than impose their expertise (Saunders 1999, p. 53).

Each participant was provided with a list of guiding questions to help them record their learning progress. It was mandatory to complete this at the end of every day after the learning conversations and hand them in. This learning record was designed primarily to help structure the learning conversations process and take the form of a learning journal for participants. The purpose of a learning journal in this context was to "deepen the quality of learning, in the form of critical thinking or developing a questioning attitude" (Boud, 2001, p. 9). However, the journal had a secondary purpose and this was to provide evidence that the specified learning outcomes that the training program was designed to deliver, were met.

After a review of the initial pilot program, several curriculum changes were made in preparation for the next training cohort (Wave 2). It was decided that learning partnerships should be at the forefront of the training program and that most of day 1 be allocated to them (4 3/4 hours, after an introduction to the program) and would focus on the setting up of these partnerships and the skills needed to sustain them. Otherwise the learning partnerships were organized in a similar way.

There was a slight change to the way the learning conversations were facilitated for Wave 2 participants. In the pilot program (Wave 1), participants had been so focused on filling in their learning records at the end of each day that they had often failed to have a conversation with their learning partners. They knew the written work was going to be handed in and possibly assessed, so it took precedence over learning conversations. In Wave 2, participants were asked to write down key learning points in their learning report throughout the training day and then use these at the end of the day as a stimulus for the learning conversations.

The main differences between the design and delivery of learning partnerships strategy in the pilot program and in Wave 2 was the increased time and focus that was put into setting up and preparing participants for their learning partnerships. There was also an attempt to reduce the time spent filling in learning record forms at the end of the day so that learning conversations could become the chief focus of the final half hour that was put aside for learning partnerships at the end of each day.

Research Methodology

During the program initial responses to the learning partnership strategy were gleaned from a strengths, weakness and possibilities analysis captured on overhead transparencies. This analysis provided a number of insights. However the authors planned to develop a deeper understanding of the value of learning partnerships in the embedding and transferring of learning in the ATO through further research. They wanted to identify ways participants were using the partnership concept back in the workplace, if at all. Additionally, the authors were keen to make improvements to the training program for future participants. The ATO were very supportive of this project and made this research possible.

The research methodology adopted was partly driven by time factors. The authors knew they had a limited time to conduct their research. Participants needed some time to reflect on the training and return to their work before research could begin but the authors also wanted to ensure participants' experiences during the training were not too distant so that they could recall their experiences accurately.

Consequently, the authors planned to circulate a survey three months after participants completed the training program. A survey was considered the least resource intensive and most effective research method available. It could draw out as much information as possible in a relatively short period of time. This would deliver data that could be worked on immediately and then could be expanded later. Future research will analyze the data collected from the survey more comprehensively and use focus groups and critical incident interviews to extend the authors' understanding of learning partnerships in this training program.

A survey instrument was developed for on-line (electronic) circulation. It was designed to disclose the perceptions of participants in relation to their use of learning partnerships before, during and after the training. The survey questions were also designed to identify participant's perceptions of whether learning partnerships had been adopted and or used effectively back in the workplace as a result of the training.

The survey was kept as concise as possible in order to maximize the number of responses and hopefully solicit the most honest responses. A short concise survey would not only minimize interruption to the participants' work but it was hoped it would also encourage participants to make the effort to complete the survey. As research shows, there is generally a correlation between high responses and short surveys (Hutchinson, 2004).

In order to ask additional questions of some of the respondents in later research, in focus groups, for example, the survey was not anonymous. According to Hutchinson, the lack of anonymity could have an impact on the candor of responses (Hutchinson, 2004). Consequently, a covering e-mail to participants made it very clear that their responses would remain confidential and would be collated without individual reference.

Some demographic questions were included at the beginning of the survey. These included identification of the area (ATO business line) the participant worked in, their age, and the number of years they had worked at the ATO. The authors wanted to determine whether any of these factors have an impact on the perception and/or take up of learning partnerships. It was recognized that when the data is broken down into these classifications for the individual waves, there would be reasonably small numbers attributed to each of these groups which most likely would not constitute reliable data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). However, the authors anticipate that there may be emerging trends over time and there may be enough data to draw conclusions based on the demographic information collected after the training program and the survey is repeated to several future waves over time.

The core of the survey was based on a ratings scale. These questions covered three phases. Firstly, knowledge and use of learning partnerships before the training program, then the perceived value and use of learning partnerships during the training program, and finally whether back in the workforce learning partnerships formed during the training were continued and whether new learning partnerships were formed. The differential scales (strongly agree to strongly disagree) was used for its useful evaluative qualities, despite possible problems regarding participant's differences in interpretation of the ratings (Cohen et al., 2000).

These ratings questions were followed by eight dichotomous (yes/no) questions. These proved very useful as respondents were forced to express a view one way or the other on the issues raised.

Finally, the survey ended with two open ended questions which were designed to solicit some personal comments regarding the participants' views of learning partnerships and hopefully enough information to identify participants for further research in the form of focus groups and critical incident interviews.

The survey was first piloted and then circulated by the ATO on-line in August 2004 to both Wave 1 and Wave 2 participants. This created some problems regarding comparability of responses as Wave 1 had completed the training program and had been back in the workplace for approximately seven months, compared to only three months for Wave 2 participants. Additionally, Wave 1 participants were not given as much instruction on learning partnerships or time to develop them during the training. However, the authors believed the data collected would still be useful and comparable to a degree. Furthermore, it was anticipated that responses from Wave 1 participants could be used as control group data.

The survey was circulated to 87 of the 100 participants in Wave 1 (several had moved areas, left the ATO or were on leave during the survey period). A response was received by 39 of those participants within 48 hours. The survey was also circulated to 203 Wave 2 participants. There were 120 responses received in the first 36 hours. These responses provided the data which was analyzed in this research.

Research Findings

The survey results identify various issues that both impact on the setting up of learning partnerships and how these were incorporated into training programs. They also highlight the value and potential uses for learning partnerships in the workplace.

There was a clear variance in responses to some questions regarding the use and opportunity to use learning partnerships back in the workplace from participants from the different Waves. This was to be expected given the difference in time spent back in the workplace between Wave 1 (seven months) and Wave 2 participants (three months).

The number of response from men and women from both Waves was very similar, both reflecting the percentages of each gender represented in the total group. However the percentage of females who attended the training program (37%) did not reflect the usual male/female ratio in the ATO. This may have effected the responses as peer learning research has shown that whilst a collaborative learning approach may suit many learners and that differences create challenges and highlight the importance of working with differences, women find peer relationships particularly important learning experiences (Hayes, 1989; Schneider, 1969).

The distribution of ages of the participants was also similar in both Waves 1 and Wave 2, with the majority (76% in both Waves) of participants between 36 and 55 years of age. This is to be expected given 58% of the overall ATO workforce is 40 years old or older (ATO Annual Report 2002-2003, p. 226).

The participants were from several different locations, and the percentage of respondents basically represented the percentage of participants in each of those locations although for Wave 1 participants, there was a higher response rate from the two larger cities, Sydney and Melbourne.

The participants were also chosen from various business lines in the ATO. This means that although they perform similar duties, they specialize in different areas (e.g., they specialize in specific taxes or types of taxpayers). Seventy nine percent (79%) of Wave 1 participants were all working in the same business line, whilst in Wave 2 only 58% came from that same business line. Wave 2, being twice the size of Wave 1, also had a slightly broader spread of participants across different business lines. This is important in terms of the types of partners available in forming learning partnerships and in the bigger picture, the exposure to different staff and ideas and consequently the potential for sharing experiences and learning from each other.

Despite these differences 74% of both Wave 1 and Wave 2 groups agreed that learning partnerships are a valuable way to support learning. Significant differences were recorded mainly in respect of maintenance of the learning partnership formed during the program and the feasibility of establishing learning partners back in the workplace.

The learning partnerships formed during the training program were maintained afterwards by 42% of Wave 2 participants compared with only 26% of Wave 1 respondents. This difference was to be expected because in Wave 2 significantly more training time was given at the start of the program for the introduction of learning partnerships and the interpersonal skills that would help their maintenance. This suggests that there is a need to ‘train’ people to use learning partnerships if they are to be successfully maintained.

However, many more Wave 1 participants (44%) sustained some level of communication with their learning partners after the training course was over. In Wave 2 there was also an increase in the number who communicated with their learning partner at this level (58%).

Wave 1 participants responded to the question about whether they had established formal learning partnerships in the workplace more than three times more positively (36%) than Wave 2 (10%) participants. Once again this result could be the due to the fact that Wave 2 participants finished the program more recently and therefore had had less time to implement what they had learnt to the workplace.

The Strengths and Limitations of Learning Partnerships

The preliminary analysis of the qualitative data collected suggests that in Wave 1 and Wave 2 there is a split between those who thought that learning partnerships were an important learning strategy that should be adopted throughout the ATO and those who could not see the benefit of this approach. The experience of Wave 2 participants appears to have been a far more positive one than that of those in Wave 1. The quantitative data reinforces that this was the case. Differences are to be expected because of the way learning partnerships were set up in the Wave 1 and Wave 2 programs. The extent of the different views participants had towards learning partnerships are expressed in the following quotes:

> I believe the concept of a learning partner is an excellent idea. I think it should be adopted within the ATO in areas that already may not have it (Wave 2 participant).

> Learning partnerships were not of great use (Wave 2 participant).

Supporting Learning and Challenging Existing Ideas

The idea that learning partnerships can support learning and challenge existing ideas is a recurring motif in comments made by those participants who were positive about learning partnerships:

> Everything I learnt though (learning partnerships/the training program) benefited the ATO through a greater understanding of the wider issues across the business lines (Wave 2 participant).

> My learning partner and I are assigned the same case and we have been able to learn from each other (Wave 2 participant).

> We have done a mini presentation to our teams, co-presenting as a partnership. We also worked on an assignment together (Wave 2 participant).

> I used the learning partnership to help throw general and topical technical issues around for discussion. We draw from each other’s experience because we both belong to different business lines and different tax spheres, so that makes the learning experience much more valuable (Wave 2 participant).

Another participant notes that learning partnerships provide the “emotional and general support that one needs from time to time in the workplace” (Wave 1 participant). Learning partnerships also seem to have been beneficial in helping some participants further analyze their practice:

> I have used the principles of learning partnerships to explore and clarify the issues around complex technical matters (Wave 2 participant).

Sampson and Cohen (2001) reinforce the idea that the support generated through a peer relationship “is an important factor” (p. 40), and Falchikov (2001) believes this can help partners “engage with academic issues at a deeper level than if working alone” (p. 69).

Perhaps one of the key factors that relate to learning partnerships is the concept of reciprocal peer learning: “Reciprocal peer learning emphasizes students simultaneously learning and contributing to other students' learning" (Boud, 2001, p. 4).

This focus in the learning partnerships on 'learning for learning's sake' reinforces that this strategy achieved one of the key goals of a bridging apprenticeship.

Networking

Many participants felt that learning partnerships helped them increase their networks within their office and more broadly within the ATO. Most importantly the partnerships enabled them to see how these networks could aid learning within the organization. For example, participants made the following comments:

> I already had developed a strong technical network of contacts that provide guidance and assistance on issues that I may require assistance. The (training program) provided a stronger understanding of the dynamics and importance of such networks to learning development (Wave 2 participant).

> The learning partnership is bigger than that. I have formed a ….learning group who contact each other every month to ensure (the training program) info and learning transcends to the workplace. Our group in NSW … represents 5 offices (Wave 1 participant).

Inappropriate Partnerships

The negative responses appeared to relate to a number of issues. Some participants found themselves linked to what they perceived to be an inappropriate partner and this was a source of dissatisfaction:

> Learning partnerships should be with people you are comfortable working with. There is no point in just throwing people together willy-nilly (Wave 1 participant).

> I feel that for a learning partnership to work there must be some pre-existing knowledge and understanding of your partner (Wave 2 participant).

The need to have time to find out more about the group and discover if a participant would make a suitable partner affected the value of the partnerships for some. Learning partnerships were established on the first day of the program so that participants could make use of them immediately and have time to reflect on what they were learning throughout the program. They were designed to last initially for only ten days, so the designers of this element of the program thought that most people would be able to sustain a partnership during this time even if they did not know each other well. It appears, however, that choice of partner was an issue for some participants and affected the level of "openness and active discussion of ideas and processes" that characterize effective learning partnerships (Boud, 2001, p. 40).

It is also interesting to note, that some participants were reluctant to embrace difference in their choice of their learning partners, and could not see how a different viewpoint might extend and challenge their learning in the program. For some having a partner who worked in a different location was seen as an insurmountable obstacle.

> I was not able to continue learning partnership … because my learning partner was from a different business line, different team and different location (Wave 1 participant).

Commitment to the Training

There is also a suggestion some partnerships did not work because of a lack of commitment to this learning strategy:

> I found my learning partnership to be valuable because we were both committed to the process. We put in the effort to summarize each day's work. However, my observation was that other pairs were not using the opportunity (Wave 2 participant).

The reasons for this lack of commitment are complex but the data suggests at least three areas of influence. The first relates to participants' commitment to the training program as a whole, the second to a lack of reinforcement of this approach by other facilitators delivering the program, the third to the organizational culture.

Some participants, especially those in Wave 1 appeared to want the program to deliver more technical content. As this was not its key purpose they were disappointed. This reinforces the idea that participants see learning as something to be delivered rather than taking responsibility for their own learning. These participants could not grasp that the training program sought to provide frameworks for sharing and consolidating their learning and experience thus enabling them to transfer that learning to others in the workplace (Forrester & McTigue, 2004; Gibb, 2002; Symes & McIntyre, 2000).

> I was attracted to (the training course) after looking at the contents of each module that were to be discussed and studied. However, only about 10% of the total content was actually discussed during the (training program) (Wave 1 participant).

Facilitation Issues

The two main issues that were raised regarding the facilitation of learning partnerships were concerned with the timing of learning conversations and the commitment of all facilitators to the learning partnership process.

The placing of learning conversations at the end of the day appeared to be a problem:

> The learning partnerships were done at the end of each days activities. While it is understood why it would be done at this time unfortunately most people just wanted to go home. Consequently it was done in a rush and not really as structured as it should have been (Wave 2 participant).

However, possibly more of a problem was the value facilitators put on the time set aside for learning conversations. The learning partnerships were the focus of day one, but the adult education specialists who set them up did not meet participants again until days 9 and 10, the last days of the program. In the meantime other facilitators from a range of backgrounds were responsible for presenting the program. In Wave 1 there was little briefing of other facilitators on the importance of learning partnerships within the program. In Wave 2, there was some briefing but the facilitators delivering the program were never able to meet to discuss the overall educational aims of the program. From the feedback we received from participants it appears that learning partnerships were not necessarily valued by other facilitators; this led to a perception that they were not worthwhile.

> I have noticed that all other lecturers during the two weeks of (the training program) were slightly bemused by the whole concept (of learning partnerships) and although they provided us with the forms, (the daily journal) they made comments to that effect (Wave 2 participant).

Additionally, two different facilitators introduced the concept of learning partnerships to the participants surveyed. Despite the joint planning and preparation, it is possible that the facilitators had different styles and approaches which may have impacted on the participants' ability and or willingness to embrace the learning partnerships.

There was another factor that relates to the design of the program which may have caused participants to feel uncomfortable with learning partnerships. This was the tension that existed between the experimental, reflective model of learning partnerships that was put forward in the day 1 presentation and the template for the learning journal which was filled out daily. The journal emphasizes precise outcomes and was handed in as evidence of learning. Some participants commented on the apparent dichotomy of learning partnerships being presented both as a tool for reflection on personal learning and as a method of assessment:

> I think the learning partnerships is a great idea but I disagree with the process of having to record, with our learning partners, the things we had learned on a daily basis as well as how we would communicate this knowledge to our team (Wave 2 participant).

> The questions on the forms were not conducive to a constructive partnership, it seemed like a formality (Wave 2 participant).

Existing Organizational Practices

Organizational culture seemed to be an import factor in how participants perceived learning partnerships. The ATO already has a team culture in place so many of the participants are used to working with others and learning from them. Many respondents pointed this out, saying learning partnerships were an unnecessary formalization of an already existing, well functioning informal process. For example, one participant commented:

> I believe that sharing information is something that people do naturally and I do not believe it was necessary to have formal structured learning partnerships in place to achieve this (Wave 2 participant).

Additionally, a majority of participants (77% in Wave 1 and 74% in Wave 2) already saw themselves as mentors in the workplace. There seemed to be a great deal of confusion between this role and their role within a learning partnership. There was also a requirement that the Wave 1 group would mentor back in the workplace with 4-5 mentees allocated to each participant. Many respondents saw learning partnerships as the same as mentoring or coaching: a supportive but not an equal relationship. This happened even though the differences (and similarities) between these roles were clearly indicated during the program and supported by study materials. Comments along these lines included:

> Prior and Post (the training program) I mentor people in my team and in my site, interacting with internal and external clients (Wave 1 participant).

> I have been working as part of a team throughout my time in tax and have been both a mentor and team leader at various times. The methods I employed during my career have changed in name as a result of office jargon but not in nature. I see the learning partnership concept as just another method/extension of what I have always been doing (Wave 2 participant).

> Would have liked to have had more emphasis on specific Mentoring and Coaching skills and perhaps a 2 day course on these, rather than 3 days of learning partnerships, communication etc (Wave 2 participant).

This blurring of the boundaries between mentoring and learning partnerships appeared frequently in the feedback. This indicates how familiar organizational structures (mentoring, working in teams) provide the framework by which new less familiar structures (learning partnerships) are viewed. There were a few exceptions where participants stated clearly that there was a difference between mentoring and learning partnerships:

> What I have been practicing (sic) prior to (the training program) was more of a mentoring role rather than a learning partnership. I see learning partnership as two or more people on the same learning curve rather than someone with better knowledge assisting and transferring knowledge (Wave 2 participant).

Some also perceived how an understanding of learning partnerships could make the mentoring relationship more equitable and help people learn from themselves rather than telling them what to do:

> The behavioral tools (re learning partnerships) that were passed onto us are being used either consciously or subconsciously in my mentoring role (Wave 2 participant).

> Recently had a new staff member ask me a question on trusts. Instead of answering his question, I said there is a marvelous little training package that would contain the answer to his question, go look it up and then show me just in case I was wrong about the answer (Wave 2 participant).

This links up with the possibility that learning partnerships were not easily accepted by some participants because they involve an equal reciprocal relationship. Whilst participants on the training program could be described as peers because they were all learning as a group together, this was not always perceived to be the case:

> My learning partner was at a higher level than me in the office hierarchy. Therefore very little fraternization could occur. He and I were not on the same wavelength and to have spent time with him would have been a futile exercise (Wave 2 participant).

The ATO, although team focused, still has many hierarchical structures in place. Therefore, mentoring and coaching which relies on concepts of the novice and the expert, would be expected to fit more comfortably within this system.

> Unfortunately people had partners foisted on them whose experience in the ATO would not fill a matchbox. Some participants in the (training program) are almost straight out of university themselves and still don't know how to apply learning in a practical way in the ATO (Wave 2 participant).

The Organizational Culture

Whilst some participants viewed learning in the ATO as happening all the time and noted that they had "other forms of sharing learning in the workplace which were very well established", others were less convinced that this was the case:

> While I feel that the principles of a learning partnership have merit, the ATO appears to have a non-supportive culture for them (Wave 2 participant).

> Our structure in the area I work in at the moment doesn't allow for all this 'you beaut learning partnership' concept (Wave 1 participant).

It is difficult to guess exactly why the participant feels the ATO culture is unsupportive of learning partnerships but perhaps the reason is closely aligned with the nature of the organization. Learning to learn encompasses a whole range of processes but most importantly, the idea of learning from experience and critical questioning introduces a need for experimenting and learning from mistakes. This approach however does not fit comfortably with the organizational goals of the ATO. This is an organization which must be both seen to be and in fact must be accurate, ethical and transparent in its dealing with its 'customers', the taxpayers, because it acts as a law administrator and a custodian of the general public's monies. This has caused the ATO to build rigid processes and procedures into the organization, including checklists and rigorous quality assurance activities that allow very little, if any, experimentation. It is possible that the kind of staff attracted into the organization tend to be those who are comfortable with this rigid structure. However, the training program that the ATO was asking for in their statement of requirements was one that encouraged creativity (thinking outside the square, looking beyond checklists) in the quest for taxpayer compliance and particularly for the identification of non-compliance.

As a result of these opposing requirements, the core of the program was received uneasily by some of the participants, as was the learning partnership approach. It was perceived that what was being presented did not fit within the culture of the ATO. Others however embraced the ideas with enthusiasm, energized by the possibility of a change in the organization. Most fitted within one of these extremes. There were very few that 'sat on the fence'.

Conclusion

The training program designed for the ATO, which has been the focus of this research, could be described as a 'bridging apprenticeship'. This is because it includes strategies for making tacit knowledge explicit and aims to make learning relevant to what happens in the workplace. The training program also focuses on encouraging participants to be more aware of how they learn and how others can help them learn. This last goal was promoted through the use of peer learning strategies, especially learning partnerships.

These learning strategies were designed to not only support learning throughout the training program but also 'bridge the gap' between the 'off the job' training and workplace practice. The research inquiry centered on how the learning partnerships, learning conversations and learning journals contributed to:

- Participants becoming more aware of themselves as learners
- How others can support participants in their learning
- Enhancing participant's learning on the program, and
- The effective transfer of learning into the workplace.

The research data indicates that respondents were polarized in their views of learning partnerships. Findings suggest that those ATO officers who embraced learning partnerships have benefited from the experience. They appear to have used the partnerships to help them maximize their learning within the program and then have transferred this approach to their workplace. There is evidence that the ATO workers who did engage with learning partnerships have enhanced their professional practice and established stronger networks both within and outside of their immediate workplace.

There were, however, some of the course participants who responded negatively to learning partnerships and did not see their relevance to workplace practice. There are many possible reasons for this result. These include factors such as the design and facilitation of the program and the organizational culture of the ATO.

In conclusion, learning partnerships and related strategies appear to be successful in bridging the gap between 'off the job training' and workplace learning. However, the way learning partnerships are set up and supported throughout a training program appears to have a direct impact in their effectiveness.

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