The Learning Organization

Book Review: Learning in Organizations: Complexities and Diversities by Peter J. Smith and Eugene Sadler-Smith
Nataša Rupčić,

Article information:

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

Book Review: Learning in Organizations: Complexities and Diversities by Peter J. Smith and Eugene Sadler-Smith
Review DOI 10.1108/TLO-08-2017-0084

The book entitled *Learning in Organizations: Complexities and diversities* by Peter J. Smith and Eugene Sadler-Smith was simultaneously published in the USA and Canada by Routledge in 2006. The reviewed edition was published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library. The main text has 206 pages, followed by references and index. The book consists of nine chapters that are divided in subchapters. The content of the book is illustrated with 12 figures and 21 tables.

In this book, the authors have analyzed and discussed the complex process of learning in organizations from the standpoint of human resource development (HRD). Managers and practitioners in modern, complex business environment seek to establish effective HRD that could contribute to the individual and organizational learning. For that purpose, practitioners often look for clear guidelines and rules that could lead to such an outcome. However, their attempts often fail because variety and diversity of practical manifestations are ignored or not identified. In this regard, the authors have presented the results of their collaborative thinking and research with the purpose to elucidate the complexity of learning and HRD in organizations. The authors have offered numerous tools that could help practitioners identify diversities and complexities in their own working and learning environments and then work on balancing various individual and organizational dimensions and their varieties. It should be noted, however, that the authors do not offer off-the-shelf solutions but instead seek to stimulate reflective enquiry and deeper understanding of HRD complexities. The book is therefore somewhat challenging for readers. However, this approach could provide more benefits than the traditional approach, which relied on oversimplifications and uniformity.

This book is useful for those whose responsibilities lie in the scope of planning, implementation and evaluation of workplace-related learning or, in particular, for those who are responsible for managing complexities and diversities in strategic and operational learning activities. That includes not only instructors, trainers, learning and development advisers, HR managers, training managers and managers in general, but also consultants and lecturers who provide learning-related services. When promoting learning processes, these individuals are often confronted with a complex set of contingencies on the individual and the organizational level that are intertwined and causally ambiguous. Readers and practitioners are encouraged to embrace complexities and ambiguities associated with learning and its context and take responsibility for creating a working environment that is adjusted to the varieties of their current reality. Such an environment can become a difficult-to-imitate organizational resource that might help to differentiate a firm from its competitors.

The authors have selected several dimensions that they consider most relevant for the practice of workplace-related learning and that are especially prone to variety and diversity.

Specifically, they have analyzed diversities in organizational and learning contexts; diversities in learning orientations; and diversities among learners, learning methods and supports. The authors suggest that diversity should be responded with flexibility and conclude with discussing the practice of reflective HRD practitioners in complex and diversified learning environments. These dimensions are discussed and critically reviewed next.

Creation of knowledge in organizations takes place in the context of social relationships and within different forms of networks. That is why diversities in organizational contexts are discussed first. Organizational context contingencies have been widely studied in management and organization literature. However, they have been inadequately addressed in models of learning and development. The authors especially suggest that the issue of size is considered as an important element of the organizational context. In this regard, smaller organizations often exhibit less intra-organizational variety, especially regarding work culture and practice. Larger organizations tackle intra-organizational variety by implementing more formal HRD structures and more detailed plans. However, in smaller organizations HRD is more informal, which is often a strength regarding the speed of their responsiveness and the development of more flexible learning networks. Besides size, the authors focus on human, intellectual and social capital; management and organizational culture; and diversity in labor, learning networks and human resource management (HRM) strategies. Dimensions of intellectual and social capital significantly add to the level of complexity and variety of HRD. The importance of social capital is especially emphasized and its structural, relational and especially cognitive components are discussed. It is important to note that the best HRD programs could fail if shared norms do not reinforce desired ways of behaving and performing as required by HRD goals. For every organization, it is important that the existing aspects and elements of the organizational context are examined and then combined and connected in different yet feasible and productive manner.

Diversities in learning contexts are discussed next. Differences and variety in contexts can result in not only different opportunities but also barriers to effective learning and HRD. The authors first discuss socio-cultural contexts relative to different organizational learning environments, then move on to discuss concepts important in designing and managing HRD (such as work-based learning, communities of practice and communities of learning and coaching and mentoring) and end this chapter by discussing forms of open and closed learning contexts/environments. The authors review learning complexity and variety relative to learning contexts by discussing socio-cultural aspects of learning with the attempt to discuss their compatibility with aspects of the individual cognition. The authors put emphasis on communities of practice and communities of learning. In the modern business, it is interesting and possible to develop networking communities of learning or practice as group learning contexts. Managers and practitioners should also be aware of varieties of learning contexts and approaches when workforce is distributed across shifts or geographically.

Diversities in learning orientations refer to differences between principal stakeholder groups, such as learners, managers and HRD, or learning practitioners. These groups can differ in motives, needs and attitudes that drive their participation in the learning process. Because of the fact that motives, needs and attitudes are mutually interrelated and serve as prerequisites for engaging in the learning process, the authors define them as three facets of the learning orientation. The authors have also analyzed them in detail from the aspect of motivation theories. The authors suggest that attitudes, needs and motives of HRD stakeholders should be acknowledged, understood and, if possible, accommodated in the

design of work-related learning. In should be noted that the authors stress the importance of learning orientation over performance orientation as an essential component of the strategic approach to HRD. Learning orientation of identified stakeholders should be related to the organizational context for learning in which learning can be either strategically focused and proactive or more tactical and reactive. The conclusion follows that strategy, HRM and HRD should be integrated on all business levels (the level of corporate strategy, the level of business strategy and business unit objectives and the operational level), while learning activities at each level should be configured in the way that they mutually reinforce each other. The task of HRD is therefore to stimulate proactive strategic thinking aligned with the mission, develop HRD policy and practice that support the needs of business units and implement personal development plans for employees that can enable them to meet performance and development targets. In this respect, the authors correlate the learning orientation with strategic orientation and discuss arguments in favor of their complementarity. The process of connecting learning orientation with strategic orientation should be supported with other HRM aspects such as appraisal and reward mechanisms with the purpose to achieve a higher degree of mutual alignment between these two orientations. Relationships between various factors explored in this chapter and shown in Figure 4.1 are interesting for further empirical research and validation.

Diversities amongst learners are especially prominent in practice. Learners can exhibit a wide range of diversities both at the individual and at the group level. These diversities may manifest themselves in ways in which learners relate to the learning process and in ways how the learning process affects them and what results it brings. More precisely, learners can differ relative to their national and cultural background; age and psychological characteristics such as abilities, preferences, self-perceptions and perceptions of reality; cognitive processes; learning; and thinking styles. All these aspects have been thoroughly reviewed and discussed in this chapter. In addition, individuals often belong to different groups and contribute to the learning process variety of these groups. In this chapter, the aspect of group-level diversity is especially considered relative to the concept of national culture as a set of values, beliefs and behaviors adopted and shared by a group of people. It should be noted that individual and group learning differences should be carefully considered by HRD practitioners and researchers as they influence organizational social interactions and subsequently the level of collective or organizational learning. The analysis presented in this chapter could be useful for practitioners in terms of heightening their awareness of the potential complexity and variety of the learning process on the individual level. Individual learners could also find the analysis useful for raising awareness of their personal characteristics and preferred learning styles and strategies. In could be concluded that the process of individual and group learning should be responded to with flexibility and intention to find ways to match the individual and group characteristics with the learning requirements and hence create a learning environment, which could produce desired results. The questions offered at the end of this chapter could serve as potential guidelines for reflection in this regard.

Diversities in learning methods should also be carefully addressed. A wide range of learning methods is available. The development of "hard" technology has considerably broadened the options available for delivering learning content and support and has increased the flexibility in terms of learning place, space and pace. "Softer" learning technologies and non-technology-based methods have also improved and are helping leverage learning in organizations. This contributes to the further increase in complexity and variety of the learning process. The inevitable question emerges on how to make a decision about which methods to use and under which circumstances. There is a breadth of

available possibilities that should be adapted to suit particular needs. The authors have addressed the following methods: one-to-one methods, one-to-many methods, distance learning, e-learning, games and simulations, action-based methods and informal workplace learning. The authors offer a number of questions that could be considered before making the choice regarding which learning method would be the most appropriate.

Diversities in learning supports refer to structural and social arrangements that support learning *in situ*. Learning supports have been widely recognized as means for maximizing effectiveness of the learning process. However, many organizations do not have systems and structures in place, which could provide adequate support for learning and/or which encourage and value learning. Practitioners should note that support could also be reflected in programs that have the purpose to raise the level of preparedness for self-directed and self-structured learning. The development of self-directed learning, skills and communities of practice and learning can be developed by developing training policies, training structures and HRD personnel. Modern organization should establish a learner-centered paradigm that supports learning. However, the question in many organizations is not if it should be developed but how could it be developed. This chapter provides guidelines in this regard. Practitioners should note that in this chapter the authors have proposed strategies designed to develop self-directedness among workplace learners; strategies for the development of workplace skills and conceptual knowledge; strategies to develop learning within a community of practice; strategies to develop training policies designed to support effective learning in the workplace; strategies to develop effective HRD structures to support learning in the workplace; strategies for trainers/mentors to assist learner development; strategies to develop knowledge, skills and responsibilities among trainers and mentors to support the development of skills and conceptual knowledge; and strategies of use to trainers and mentors to support the development of participation in a community of practice.

Finally, the authors suggest that diversity should be responded through flexibility. In this chapter, the authors offer a series of frameworks that could be used to design a tailored HRD approach, which could match diversities of learners and the environment. The authors offer a series of questions that could help in the strategy selection when implementing HRD plans. The authors also have presented a framework accompanied by a series of questions illustrating various activities associated with developing individuals' knowledge and skills, which could enable greater learner self-direction. The way how trainers and other HRD personnel could observe individual learners or groups of learners in action has also been presented along with suggestions on how to adjust the learning delivery to suit the learning needs and goals. The figures referring to the representation of enterprise-based learner-centered development system and the model for a responsive and interactive pedagogy based on learning style/preferences deserve special attention from researchers and practitioners. The book ends with the chapter entitled "The reflective HRD practitioner development", which represents a summary of key findings and assumptions on which they are based.

Special value of this book lies in questions offered at the end of each chapter, which serve as an interpretative framework and practitioner's checklist of issues worth considering. By reviewing presented tools and questions, practitioners could identify ways to design and develop context-specific HRD responses. The primary value of the book therefore lies in stimulating reflective enquiry regarding issues presented in the book in the process of finding unique, creative, diversified, effective and, above all, context-based solutions, which could benefit not only individuals but also organizations. By embracing complexities and

70

diversities of HRD, practitioners could facilitate the process of organizational learning and provide long-lasting organizational benefits.

Besides practitioners, academics and especially PhD students could benefit from studying this book. It could help them harvest ideas that could serve as a foundation for building theoretical models and testing their validity in various business contexts. In addition, many propositions and frameworks presented in this book deserve empirical validation. Future work on the presented propositions and frameworks would enable further development of the HRD body of knowledge and practice, which would contribute to the development of unique competitive advantages based on learning and authenticity of involved stakeholders.

Nataša Rupčić
Faculty of Economics, University of Rijeka, Rijeka, Croatia

This article has been cited by:

1. ReeseSimon, Simon Reese. 2018. Gender impact on the learning organization. *The Learning Organization* **25**:1, 63-65. [Citation] [Full Text] [PDF]