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The Changing Context of Practice

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1 THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF PRACTICE

Stephen M. Brown

We are living in a time of incredibly rapid, all pervasive, and continuous change. Some writers have suggested we are witnessing a paradigm shift, entering a new age: the post-industrial or the information age. While we are not able to fully describe what the new age will look like, we are able to see side-by-side, glimpses of the old and new paradigms. We are aware that old ways of doing business and thinking no longer work. Even the old questions have no meaning in the new context. Concepts that were opposites are often no longer opposite and are now related. For example, Republicans and Democrats work feverishly to point out their differences, but they sound more and more alike. They sound like politicians from the old paradigm. The opposite of *feminine* is not *masculine*; it is *not feminine*. These two constructs, once seen as polar, are no longer so.

Our awareness of the persuasiveness of change is exhibited in our attempt to change and recalibrate our social institutions. We are reinventing government, reforming education, restructuring organizations, and reengineering businesses. All have in common the awareness that our social institutions are facing new challenges, and old answers do not work. In fact, the questions have changed. Unfortunately, our inability to see fully the new paradigm has often lead us to find comfort in our old answers. We are debating the answers of the present within the context of the past. For we know these things, and we know they worked and were comfortable in a different time.

The demands on all professionals are more complex, ever changing, and allow less room for error than ever before. They are asked to develop solutions to a new set of questions, using new information, in increasingly rapid time frames. Professionals do this in a context that is changing and is understood only in the incomplete state in which it has revealed itself. Wheatley (1991) uses the analogy of the change in physics when the prevalent theory changed from a Newtonian model to a model based on quantum physics. This level of change, in which our entire frame of reference is changed, is analogous to what is happening in our current practice. This change of the frame of reference makes all of our explanations and understanding profoundly limited.

It is the understanding of context that has always been the strength of successful practitioners. The understanding of context constitutes a major portion of the implicit knowledge that writers such as Schon (1983) attribute to effective practitioners. Context is not only a systematic part of our understanding, it is the background to our actions as practitioners. It is part of the frame of reference through which we practice and through which we construct meaning about our practice. Wenger (1997) says, "Practice connotes doing, but not just doing of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do."

We are currently living in a world that is rapidly and thoroughly changing. This chapter will now take a brief look at environmental forces that are driving the change. These forces are not mutually exclusive but are overlapping and interdependent.

Demographics

Who America is as a people has changed and continues to change. This means our customers (clients) and workers are changing. This, of course, has profound implications for our organizations and work. The demographic changes, which are mirrored in the other advanced industrial nations, are: aging of the population and the workforce, fewer entry-level employees, and a greater diversity in the workforce. Another dimension to this change results from the internationalization of the economy. This has meant that our workforce, customers, and organizations are by their very nature multicultural and multinational. At a minimum our competition is, too.

The people born during the post-World War II baby boom make up an extraordinary percentage of the population (about one-third of the total population and an even higher percentage of the current workforce.) They are aging. They are also immediately followed by a generation that is relatively small. This is a result of lowered fertility rates among the Baby Boomers, particularly among white suburban dwellers. The interaction of these factors and the considerably longer life spans as a result of the advancement of medical technology has resulted in an aging population, an aging workforce, and fewer first-time entrants into the workforce. The median age of the American workforce was 28 years old in 1970; by 1990 it had risen to 33 years; it will continue to rise to 39 years in 2010, and peak at 42 in the year 2040. (U.S. Senate Select Committee on Aging, 1988) It is noteworthy that first-time entrants to the workforce have traditionally been the source of newly educated, relatively cheap, and energetic labor.

The lowered fertility rate of white suburban baby boomers, the relatively higher fertility rates of African Americans and Hispanics, and relaxed immigration laws have combined to make our population and workforce much more diverse than ever before. The higher participation rate of women in the workforce has given this diversity an additional dimension. Attempts to understand the ramifications of this diversity are hampered because we view it through the lens of the old context. So, industrial America attempts to understand the ramifications of organizations in which white males are no longer the majority. The real news is that no group is the majority, and the population has become so diverse that there is no common definition of *minority*. Our workforce has obvious differences of race, gender, language, country of origin, and culture. Very few universal assumptions about the values, experiences, and motivation of our workforce can be made.

Employees from the new generation entering the workforce have fundamental different skills and values from the Baby Boomer generation. While generations have always had differences, the differences have been exaggerated by the rapidity of change. That is, the new generation has grown up in a world that is fundamentally and profoundly different from the preceding generation, and it has had extremely different experiences. For example, the new generation is the first to have grown up with computer technology around them. They do not translate a pre-computer world experience to the computer as the preceding generation has had to do. The issues of computerization, computer integration, and computer literacy are not their issues.

These changes have resulted in a workforce that is more diverse, and may even further extend the popular meaning of the word. The workforce is aging and more experienced, but the experience is in a world that is fading from view. Our workforce, customers, and competition are often separated by geography, culture, and language. The most basic assumptions about our workforce, organizations, and practice need to be examined as they often are predicated on a more homogeneous population. Even our theories of learning, upon which most of the practice of training professionals is based, are relatively untested with our new definition of population.

Information Explosion

A second environmental force that is driving many other changes is an information explosion. Change is not only all pervasive but is occurring at an unprecedented pace. We are doubling our knowledge about every 36 months, a process that took thousands of years during prehistoric times and hundreds of years only a few generations ago. This process continues to accelerate. People who we think of as founders of fields, such as Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein are just a few generations removed from us. DNA and the microchip were all discovered during the lifetime of the typical Baby Boomer. Likewise, 90 percent of all works in the Library of Congress have been published since 1950.

Many of these changes are being fueled by rapid advances in computer and communications technology. These advances are unprecedented in their constancy, rapidity, and implication. They have resulted in computer technology becoming small and cheap enough to be available to the majority of workers. In 1993, 45.8 percent (Bassi, Benson & Cheney, 1997, p. 33) of workers reported that they use computers on their jobs, and the number continues to rise. Advances in communications technology make the global economy possible.

Availability of information technology to employees in every level in the organization makes the flattening of organizations possible. This can also lead to moving decision-making down the organization and lessening power differences, which are often based on access to information. Changes in work processes, which have been supported by advances in technology, have

increased the output per employee and support new organization structures. Technological advances have also supported improvements in customer service.

While the availability of massive amounts of information presents incredible possibilities, it can make the simplest of tasks very complicated and time consuming. Every decision can involve endless amounts of information, and eventually still be based on incomplete data. Standard answers are open to questions. The shelf life of knowledge and products is extremely short. Knowledge has become a competitive advantage and the fuel of the new economy. Learning and applying new knowledge are important tasks in all organizations.

Economic Shifts

Our economy is global. Our customers and competition are international. This has forced us to meet international standards of quality, customer service, and value. The new customer has high expectations. Fast moving communications technology and international competition means an innovation will soon be produced better, faster, or cheaper. Knowledge creation and application are the competitive advantage of the new economy.

Our organizations have become flatter, less hierarchical, and more customer driven. The training organization often has less full-time personnel to perform more tasks. The American Society for Training and Development's (ASTD) Benchmarking Forum reports that the number of employees per training staff member increased 10 percent from 1994 to 1995 (Bassi, Benson & Cheney, 1997, p. 3). The new structure has internal staff performing tasks that are part of the organization's core capabilities, and contracting for the others. The training organization will increasingly become a networked or virtual organization with the ability to access incredible expertise, but it will have fewer full-time, permanent employees.

Managing this type of organization takes a different set of skills. These changes have created new roles, less security, and greater demands for knowledge and output on all workers. Working with employees to realize these changes and organizing ourselves within the new framework are important and immediate tasks for the training organization.

In general, the focus of training is moving from the individual to the organization. This manifests itself in various ways. We now speak of organizational learning. We tend to be interested in the organizational impact of training, not individual learning. Training solutions have been replaced with performance interventions that are measured by their organizational impact. Less and less our language describes organizations in terms of the individuals that perform the roles. More often we describe organizations with language from computer technology: networks, software, systems, generation, and output.

Training

Training will have to adjust to new roles and expectations in organizations. The organizations have changed. The workforce has changed. The context of practice has changed. The customer and products have changed. Thus, training will have to change to be effective. There is a demand for justification of training expenditures and initiatives. This has led to traditional classroom training becoming an intervention of secondary resort. Importantly, it has also led to the need to demonstrate training activities' impact on strategic initiatives, core organizational capabilities, organizational effectiveness, and the bottom line.

The most important and fundamental change will be a shift from training to learning. Filling seats and hours will not be our task. However, leading people through the changes and helping them adapt to new ways of doing business will be.

We will have new roles and relationships within the organization. Environmental influences drive our need to change. Our training functions must be designed to help the organization survive these times of uncertainty and realize their vision of the future. This requires

- Visualizing the strategy of the organization
- Assessing the current state of the workforce
- Developing a strategy to develop the competence needed to meet the strategy

- Implementing the strategy
- Institutionalizing learning
- Evaluating the process

This often occurs in a context in which the required tasks have increased, the core staff who perform these tasks has decreased, and the workforce is enveloped by change.

Training Expectations

The organizational expectations for training have also shifted dramatically. The most pronounced change is a new and vigorous justification of the cost of training based on return or organizational impact. This is being driven by the competitive nature of cost structures of the international economy and the resulting organizational structure, which is flat, thinner, and supports very few administrative costs.

Often training professionals are being asked to do more, because they have a more important role in the strategy of the organization. The ability to generate and apply knowledge is a competitive advantage and source of new products, services, and revenue. These changes and the changing organizational context have created new roles for trainers. Some of these roles are

- Business Unit Manager and manager of a virtual organization with permeable boundaries and vendors to be managed and evaluated
- Facilitator of Change and consultant to change managers on managing change
- Learning Specialist who consult to organizational business partners
- Performance Enhancers who work to enhance individual employee performance through intervention strategies that include, but are not limited to, classroom training
- Manger of Information Resources
- Facilitator of Learning Organization and proponent of systems thinking

- Diversity Advocate, facilitator of multiple voices, conflict resolver, and defender of the unpopular opinion
- Intervention Consultant and Intervention Evaluator
- Assessment and Evaluation Expert

Conceptually, training professionals have a different relationship with knowledge (information) and a new definition of the customer. The information explosion and technological advances have created an incredible, rapidly growing body of knowledge available to more and more people. No longer can trainers stay experts in multiple fields. Trainers no longer hold the privileged position of all knowing content expert. It is quite common that within groups being trained there are individuals with more depth of knowledge, more experience, or more time to access current knowledge. This has moved training professionals from being content experts who bring "the info" into a training room to being facilitators of learning and guides to available knowledge. Trainers no longer own knowledge but synthesize and provide resources to clients who also have access to knowledge.

A new definition of *customer* is brought about by the changed organizational structure. As training has moved from satisfying trainees to affecting organizational performance, the definition of *customer* has broadened. Trainees are still customers and their evaluations are important sources of feedback for continuous improvement and quality. However, their organizational unit and the organization as a whole are now part of the client system, where training is performed to solve business problems of the unit and affect the organization.

Evaluation

These changes have resulted in increased pressure on the training function to demonstrate its worth. This has been asked in several different ways. Do trainers do a good job? What is their impact on our work? Is there a cheaper way to do this? What is the value-added? The last is, What is the effect on our profitability; is there an ROI?

The literature of training evaluation provides a framework to answer these questions and has addressed many of the current issues for trainers. Some time

ago Donald Kirkpatrick (1994) provided a framework of four levels of evaluation. The first level being trained perception; the second, learning; the third, performance; and the fourth, impact. Jack Phillips (1996) has written that evaluation must go beyond level four and focus on real measurement of ROI. Dana Gaines Robinson, whose writing (1989) focused many trainers on impact now (1994) directs trainers to become performance consultants and de-emphasize training as an intervention. Robert Brinkerhoff (1987) uses data gathering and evaluation to make the training function more customer focused and to practice continuous improvement. His work emphasizes the evaluation of learning as training's only direct result.

However, these practices do not, in the author's opinion, represent a choice. They do not represent a menu from which evaluators can choose. Evaluators must respond to the new requirements by implementing all these concepts and evaluating at multiple levels. Training must be customer focused and committed to continuous improvement. To do this evaluators must collect data that can be used to improve training in terms of customer expectations and satisfaction. In the new organization, the definition of customer training has expanded from the trainee in the classroom to include the trainee's unit manager, the unit, and the organization. Level I data (from Kirkpatrick's model) is still needed to get feedback on the trainee's perceptions of the experience. This data can directly give information for improvement and focus on satisfying the most visible customer. However, Kirkpatrick's Level III evaluation, which measures the performance of the trainee, is important to both trainees and their business unit. The impact on the business problem being addressed is probably the most important data to the unit and organization. It tells us not only if the training was effective but if the training provided was an appropriate response to the business problem being addressed. Return on investment can be viewed as the ultimate impact, or an additional level of evaluation. Either way it is an all-important evaluation level in today's business environment, for it addresses a question that is inevitable.

Kirkpatrick's Level II evaluation (learning) has probably become less important in today's business environment. This is not because there isn't need to learn; it is because the business environment is an applied one. In the business context, learning usually means application or performance. When a new software system is to be learned, it means we can use it. This separates the business environment from school. In school the only task is to demonstrate that you know something as it is defined by the school. In the business

environment, you need to do something with this knowledge. The new business environment is all about performance.

Level III measures performance, or the application of knowledge, and Level IV, the impact on the business problem. These are the levels, along with ROI, upon which today's organizations have focused. Additionally, most evaluators have done a poor job with Level II evaluation, using tests or certifications as the measurement. However, paper-and-pencil tests are not a substitute for performing the task for which one is being trained (authentic assessment). Authentic assessment is being used more often in education (Moon, 1997). Authentic assessment looks more like Level III evaluation.

Data show that evaluation is predominately performed at Level I. In ASTD's Benchmarking report (Bassi, Benson & Cheney, 1997, p. 3), it was reported that 94 percent of courses were evaluated at Level I. The percentages then descend, 34 percent at Level II, 13 percent at Level III, and 3 percent at level IV. The differences are not as great in a survey reported by Linkage, Inc., (AME Newsletter 1996). They report that only 42 percent of responding companies perform Level I evaluation, 43 percent Level II, 34 percent Level III, and 16 percent Level IV. It is apparent that evaluation of any kind is not universally done, even though there is a need to justify training, and it is through systematic evaluation that we improve our practice.

Integrating the concepts of the cited authors, there are probably three kinds of evaluation data needed today. They measure

- Customer satisfaction
- Impact on the business problem
- Return on investment

The tasks for training are to satisfy customers and meet their expectations, provide solutions to business problems with which they are presented, and contribute to the profitability and the mission of the company. Everything that training does should contribute to one of these tasks. These are the same tasks of all other business units in a corporation. There should be no more discussions about training being more like a business. If the training unit is in a

corporation or is providing training to customers, it is part of the business. The current move to align training more with the corporate strategy is to admit the need for a correction.

Evaluative data should measure training's success at completing its business tasks. Individual performance, as in Kirkpatrick's Levels II and III, are not goals in and of themselves but are a focus only when they are solutions to a business problem or integral to customer satisfaction. In the business environment, learning and individual performance are important as they are applied and promote customer satisfaction, solutions to business problems, or contribute to profitability.

Customer Satisfaction

The evaluation of customer satisfaction is a little more complex than was once thought. The definition of *customer* has been expanded. Not only are the employees participating in the training of customers, but in this new organizational configuration, the business unit with the problem and the business unit manager are also customers.

We are measuring perception of quality, convenience, and value as well as whether the customer's expectations were met. This information is crucial to continuous improvement. It is important to note that if the customer's expectation includes learning or improved individual performance, then achievement of these goals is part of customer satisfaction. Thus, it needs to be evaluated. This is where the individualistic notion of learning comes into this schema. It is important when it is part of the customer's expectation or as a prerequisite for performance. This notion of customer satisfaction has expanded the definition of both who is identified as the customer and the elements of satisfaction.

Business Impact

This level of evaluation is the one that is usually the most important to the business unit manager. It answers the question, Did the training make a positive difference in the business problem I have? Doing this level of evaluation requires working with the business unit manager to identify the

business problem up front. The emphasis is on identifying the problem, not on what needs to be taught, delivery, or trainees to be serviced. All of these things are designed to address the business problem. It also makes trainers think of training as one problem-solving intervention among many.

The steps for performing this level of evaluation are

1. Identify the business problem.
2. Develop an evaluation strategy.
3. Collect baseline data on the problem.
4. Design training intervention.
5. Deliver training.
6. Collect outcome data on the problem.

Return on Investment

Training has no choice but to demonstrate its effect on corporate profitability in today's organization. This is true of every unit in the organization. While it was once considered impossible to measure the ROI of training, many organizations are now doing it. The knowledge to do it is readily available to the practitioner. However, it is still difficult, long term, and complex. Discussions with cost accountants are helpful. However, it is possible that once you begin to measure ROI, your process will improve. The advice of many in the profession is to demonstrate your contribution, because the stereotype about training is not necessarily that it makes a contribution.

Conclusion

Environmental and organizational changes are putting new demands on training. Training must change to support new organizational structures within a complex and changing business and social environment. Training is changing in who we serve, how we serve them, and why we serve them.

Forces of change in the environment—the global, knowledge-based economy, the information explosion, advances in technology, changes in the workforce, and evolving organizational architecture—have resulted in pressure on training organizations to justify their costs in terms of improvement in individual and organizational performances. There is pressure to be customer focused, high quality, just in time, and cost effective. Training organizations are required to facilitate the changing roles of an aging, international, and culturally diverse work force. Training is also being asked to facilitate the application and creation of new knowledge and the integration of ever-changing technology in work processes.

These factors have resulted in new roles for training organizations, such as change consultants, vendor managers, and information synthesizers. New organizational structures, which are smaller, flexible and have permeable boundaries, with external vendors have been adopted. Training is seen as one of many performance enhancing interventions. There is movement away from the classroom toward less costly, more decentralized delivery, including electronically distributed delivery.

The implications are that training evaluation has had to focus on achievement of strategic initiatives, organizational performance, and return on investment on training expenditures. Training organizations have had to demonstrate they are well-managed organizations that make decisions based on results, costs, and other organizational business concerns. The definition of customers has been expanded from the employees in the classroom to include their managers and business units, and evaluation has had to expand from employee-in-the-classroom satisfaction to individual and organizational performance. This has meant not only a change in the level of evaluation but in evaluation becoming multileveled. While these evaluative processes should be made easier by the availability of information and technology, they have often added levels of complexity to them.

To meet these challenges, evaluators must move with the environmental and organizational changes. These changes create a need to look at evaluation differently. Evaluation of training must be multilevel, customer focused, and support continuous improvement of training. Evaluation should demonstrate its affect on a targeted business problem and ROI. The challenge is to provide

meaningful data that enables you to assess customer satisfaction, business impact, and return on investment.

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