SOCIAL AND MANAGEMENT RESEARCH JOURNAL

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OLELT (Online English Language Training) as a Means of Harnessing Human Capital and Propagating Learning Organization

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ABSTRACT

With rapid development in e-learning in Malaysia Higher learning institutions, UiTM also plays a proactive role in knowledge dissemination and acculturation by embarking on online training. With the increasing use of Internet and computer at the workplace, e-training should be recognized as a way to meet the current challenges and workplace demands to propagate life long learning and learning organization. This paper studies the self-directed learning experience on an on-line English Language training program known as Online English Language Training (OLELT). The training program was first implemented on UiTM Kelantan lecturers to help them improve their English Language proficiency. Using a case study, data were collected and analyzed qualitatively using in-depth interviews and observations on ten lecturers from various disciplines. The emerging themes show that online training is efficient, cost effective and motivating if it is properly planned and designed. It also promotes self-paced and continuous learning experience. However, there are barriers and constraints faced by the participants that need to be addressed.

Introduction

As formal education and schooling remain highly valued in most societies, many educators, employers, policy makers and average citizens place high value on keeping current on constantly changing knowledge. Merriam and Caffarella (1991) stress that "learning in adulthood means becoming more autonomous and self-directed" as learners are capable of planning, conducting, managing and evaluating their own learning by making use of the resources available through a variety of activities such as reflecting, transferring new knowledge and skill, making decision and even creating their own learning style (Knowles, 1980; Ash 1985; Kesten, 1987, Bandura, 1997 and Ponton, 1999). Technology is now easily available and is changing the way educators think about teaching and the way they disseminate their knowledge (Wan Zumusni, 2007). Educators should also be able to update their knowledge by making use of the technology such as internet so that they can be proficient and comfortable using technology in disseminating knowledge. This means having basic computer literacy is insufficient and educators should be able to use computer technology for their professional growth so that they can integrate it into their work and learning experiences with ease. E-learning or online learning is learning facilitated through network technologies in the form of audio graphic systems. It has been used to provide efficient delivery of information and thus favour independent learning (Garrison and Anderson, 2003: 12).

Self directed learning is a way to help adults to be autonomous or self-directed learners as learning in adulthood can occur beyond the presence of accredited teachers, outside formal training organizations and in other ways never thought possible when learners learn to take charge of their learning. Self-directed learning has been described as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others," to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975). This paper propagates e-training for academicians to create knowledge workers and a learning organization. Data from a case study on the learning experience of professional educated adult learners in an online English Language training program were collected and analyzed qualitatively using in-depth interviews and observations on ten lecturers from various disciplines. The emerging themes show that online training is efficient, cost effective and motivating if it is properly planned and designed. It also promotes self-paced and continuous learning experience. However, there are barriers and constraints faced by the participants that need to be addressed.

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Literature Review

As Malaysia is moving towards a knowledge-based economy in the mid-1990s, the demand for knowledge workers to support the knowledge-based economy is required (Ahmad, 2001). At higher learning institutions, lecturers are expected to keep abreast with the technological upgrading and be familiar with the latest teaching and learning innovation. Adult learning very much depends on the nature of society at any particular time (Merriam, Caffarela and Baumgartner, 2007: 5). It is about responding to the increasing and diversified demand and how to manage the explosion (Belanger, 1996 in Merriam, Caffarela and Baumgartner, 2007) brought by computer technology and globalization, which requires that organization increases their ability to learn and collaborate and manage diversity, complexity and ambiguity (p. 16). Although technology is a major thrust of learning today, Tracy (1992) identifies six categories of methods in adult training namely one-to-one training (for instance on-the-job-training, coaching); interactive training (multimedia, interactive video system), distance training (correspondence study, teleconferencing); centralized training (instructor-led training), learner-controlled (self-directed) training and other forms of training. Mazanah and Associates (2001) discovered eight different methods used in educational and training programmes with course / trainings the highest (52%), followed by workshop (27.3%) and advisory services (12.3%) apart from other methods such as seminar, dialogue, conference, symposium and others. Normally the training is short-term to address specific needs for the target audience.

Though in Malaysia nationwide access to computer technology and the internet has not yet been fully realized (Zoraini Wati Abbas, 2004) there is evidence that the post modern classroom is quickly replacing the traditional classroom with the rising number of computers owned by public schools and the proportion of public schools that have Internet access is on the rise (p. 55). According to Merriam, Caffarela & Baugartner, 2007: 39), online learning is a form of distance education, which has a long history of serving adults who otherwise should not have access to continuing and higher education. The defining characteristic of all forms and generations of distance education (DE) is the separation of student and teacher in time or space. Web-based courses is the third generation of DE (Moore and Kearshle, 1996), distinguished by "an increased degree of learner control and flexibility, interactive communication and group-oriented processes" (Conrad, 2005: 445).

As the founder of humanistic psychology, Maslow (1970) proposes a theory of human motivation based on a hierarchy of needs. Although self-actualization is the primary goal of learning, Maslow posits other goal (Sahakian, 1984: p. 439) among them the discovery of a vocation, the knowledge of acquisition of a set of values, the realization of life as precious, the acquisition of peak experiences, a sense of accomplishment, the satisfaction of psychological needs

and learning to choose discriminately. The conceptual framework for this study is also drawn from the educational experience in setting up a community of enquiry among the lecturers found in Garrison and Anderson (2003), which focuses on the setting up of a community of inquiry. Three major elements are involved namely social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence (structure/process). Candy (1991) distinguishes between autonomy as a learner (to be self-directed in learning) and autonomy as a general personal attribute in clarifying the nature of autonomy and self-direction. The term self-direction, he argues, refers to four distinct phenomena: personal autonomy, the ability to manage one's own learning, a teaching and learning environment which encourages learner control, and the independent pursuit of learning outside formal institution. As Caffarella (1993: p. 26) observes about self-directed learning,

> The focus of learning is on the individual and self-development, with learners expected to assume primary responsibility for their own learning. the process of learning, which is centered on learner need, is seen as more important than the content; therefore, when educators are involved in the learning process, their most important role is to act as facilitators, or guides.

The term "knowledge workers" has long been highlighted by Drucker (1993 in Norsaidatul, Harneive, and Valida, 1999: 19) as:

> We know that the source of wealth is something specifically human: knowledge. If we apply knowledge to tasks we already know how to do, we call it productivity. If we apply knowledge to tasks that are new and different, we call it innovation. Only knowledge allows us to achieve those two goals.

Moyer (2004) argues on effectiveness of learning at the workplace by offering suggestions on how to design the expected outcome accordingly. Filippeli (2003) also feels that opportunities for professional development in technology is increasing and these opportunities need to be made available and more emphasis must be placed on the integration of technology across the curriculum. Studies show that Malaysian workforce participate informal workplace learning as part of their employment directed by political and economic agenda other than for organizational effectiveness (Muhamad and Idris, 2005).

Methodology

The qualitative approach is used to study the online training participants' learning process and experience. Although initially 30 lecturers from various disciplines signed up for OLELT only ten most active participants were

interviewed. The interviews took place at the participants' respective offices and were tape-recorded and later transcribed with the permission of the participants. The interview guide was developed in a semi-structured interview protocol for one or two hours each session. Data from OLELT participants are collected through in-depth semi-structured interview protocol, documentation in the form of reflection journal and observations during the 12 week course. Observations were made while they work and their comments and other noteworthy incidents are recorded. The information were gathered and then organized to be used in conjunction with the in depth questionnaires to study the learning process.

Results and Discussions

Participants believe that OLELT can help them to a certain extent to improve their English Language proficiency if they put more time and effort in it. One issue voiced out by Participant 1 is the lack of avenue to use English Language among lecturers:

> "... don't have much practice here because nobody here speaks English except Mr. X"

[Source: fieldwork transcription notes]

The other issue is their lack of participation which can be detected when they postponed getting started. After the workshop, participants just brought back the file to their respective offices and delayed in getting started and incorporating OLELT as part of their daily tasks, or planning on going through OLELT at least 2-3 times a week, 20 minutes to an hour. It is undeniable that every adult learner has to carry out their personal duties as husband/wives, mothers, daughters, caregivers that takes a lot of time and effort. However no matter how busy they are, they can find time to improve their EL proficiency by incorporating OLELT in their schedule. This is done by putting aside some time either in the beginning of their day or at the end or in between, depending on their schedule for OLELT. They have to be constantly aware that they are participants of an e-training program to improve their English Language.

The low level of participation and completion rate can also be caused by other external factors like getting scholarship to further studies. Despite his interest in OLELT, during the course P2 got a scholarship to Australia, so he had to focus on IELTS and did not have much time to surf OLELT and do the exercises.

> "... in the beginning I want to improve my English but at the same time I got scholarship to further studies. Itu yang mengacau tu at the same time OLELT running so tak sempat nak explore sangat."

[Source: fieldwork transcription notes]

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Participants also did not allocate time for online self directed learning in their schedule and just do it anytime they feel like surfing OLELT. Failing to plan learning time makes learning ineffective and not well-planned.

"Don't know where to slot. I consider OLELT as minimal thing bukannya priority. Cuma I tak cakap benda tu kat you. I tau benda ni kalau I tak bagitau kat you. I want to stop OLELT ni, patutnya I kena bagitau I tak boleh carry on".

[Source: fieldwork transcription notes]

Participants' lack of interest in using OLELT to improve their English language proficiency can be explained by:

In terms of English if she or he is a lecturer dia ada ego – I'm a lecturer – buat apa nak belajar. Itu my personal view. Satu lagi, it doesn't create fun, something exciting, sketchy something vogue ke, glamour ke...just remind you of school days – learning about words, pronunciation English Language could be a boring thing to do for lecturers since dia orang pun mengajar. Itu my personal view. Kalau you nak tanya mungkin di kalangan pensyarah itulah social culture kecuali ada insentif. Duit ke macam direct selling ni dia panggil apa...pyramid. Tapi kalau I apa-apa pun sama juga. I tengok di kalangan lecturer bila ada benda macam tu of course human being or lecturer any program yang tak ada langsung insentif in terms of unsur-unsur gertak ke...kan dalam kerajaan kalau nak buat apa diwajipkan hadir, atau haramkan something. Kalau program tu dia hadir, masuk CV, prestasi, performance appraisal. No lecturer atau staff sanggup can reject or mess around. Sebab dia tak ada unsur-unsur begitu, gertak ataupun leader punya concern.

[Source: fieldwork transcription notes]

The above statement shows that OLELT lacks incentive for participants because they cannot see the long term reward, that they are doing this for themselves. Furthermore, there is no directive from the management and their time and effort do not yield any immediate rewards. He feels that if the management stresses on the importance of English language and being involved in research among lecturers, they would take learning and improving their English language proficiency seriously:

Beza dulu dengan sekarang masa Saiful* dulu, one good thing about Saiful encouraged lecturers to do research in English. Saiful pernah buat setiap orang diwajibkan ada research proposal.

What can we do to involve...everyone must submit proposal and we work with each other.

Edit...of courselah edit..ni...kalau ramai-ramai memanglah banyak kerja. The consequence is on committee you [he's referring to UiTM Academy of Language Studies lecturers who will be busy helping out with translation and proofreading works when more lecturers are involved in research due to lack of EL proficiency]...dulu benda ni jadi tapi tak sekarang. Tak ada effective enforcement [from the management].

[Source: fieldwork transcription notes]

A study indicates that of those who do sign up for an online course, between 50% and 80% never finish the course (Delio, 2000). The reasons include initial design issues, instructional design and development issues, dissemination and implementation issues and the issue of being self-directed (Romiszowski, 2004). Jenkins and Visser (2007) estimate from 50% to 80% of e-learning participants fail to finish their courses. During the field work, similar factors described by Romiszowski (2004) on elearning success and failure namely technology, needs, management and learning are found.

Despite the enthusiasm and heightened awareness of the self directed learning concept explained in the workshop, participants fail to incorporate the training into their busy schedule. It is always at the back of their head, they silently whisper or remind themselves about it especially upon seeing the researcher who looks like her. Some can be plain ignorant, nonchalant, and pretended as if nothing happens but some apologetically come out with excuses without being asked.

Another emerging theme is participants do not reach out for assistance. When in doubt of facing problem either in setting sated on managing their time to include OLELT in their schedule, participants just keep it to themselves and do not communicate their obstacles, fears and concerns. They do not request for help by emailing or calling the moderator and some even avoid from seeing her around the campus or during the National Academic Conference (in December 2007) due to embarrassment and uneasy feeling. Despite the mailing list created for OLELT participants, they feel uneasy and are reluctant to post their message due to the fear of exposing their weakness to other participants. Few participants posted notes, most send their questions and comments to the moderator personally. This lack of privacy also deters participants to post any notes that can be read by other OLELT members and their real names are exposed as voiced out by a participant.

More responses are coming from emails addressing the moderator personally including a poem, questions and sharing including encouraging comments from participants. Such messages are forwarded to OLELT mailing list, after deleting the sender's name to show to the rest that they are not alone and shouldn't be ashamed if they have not got started. Participants do have confidence in themselves to improve their EL proficiency even though they admit that if they put more time and effort, they are able to achieve their goals.

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Crowther (2000, pp. 489-490) summarizes the notion on nonparticipation as resistance rather than barriers as:

It seems reasonable to surmise that many people find adult education unattractive and irrelevant to their daily lives. Despite many well intentioned efforts to attract people the sense of frustration felt by their failure to respond to what is offered is often evident. It is easy thereafter to assume people are "apathetic" and have limited horizons.

To improve my English related to English language secara online cumanya all the information on the internet in English. So the important thing is I read a lot samada I print out atau baca dari internet. Banyak juga improvement nampak part reading, writing, listening tak de masalah langsung. I know how to start, linking all the words, conclude my statement, manipulate content tapi in terms of speaking tu yang penting.

If I want to know something, best to check internet. Even tengok tv contoh CSI tv program and they try to solve an interesting case related to chemical I tak pernah dengar. Besok or after the program I check on the internet. Contoh baru ni dia sebut ada kaitan dengan satu perkataan yang I tak familiar..I surf if I look them in dictionary semua description of the word. But internet, ada image, video even detailed description.

[Source: fieldwork transcription notes]

The above statements shows that Participant 1 do practice SDL in using web based resource learning by looking up for information on the net, not necessarily using OLET.

One interesting finding can be seen from the cultural perspective. Although the concept of self directed learning (SDL) is popular and has long been practiced in western countries, it is not the Malay culture for learners to be independent, resourceful, motivated due to the national education system which create spoon-fed rote learners. Malaysian education system is very structured and examination-oriented while OLELT is flexible and not examination-oriented, a system totally opposite from what the participants are used to. This is particularly when they have to make decisions, construct their learning objectives and tasks, plan and manage their own learning system and fitting it into their schedule. Brander in Egbert and Petrie (2005) stress that educators must acknowledge the cultural influence on teaching and learning and of course English as second languages are acquired through social, cultural and linguistic interactions through which meaning is negotiated (Chappell, 1997). Based on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural constructivism principles where the literary approach suggests that reading and writing in the second language involve far more than the simple decoding and encoding of texts. Chappelle (1997), Gray & Stockwell, (1998), Tam (2000) and Warschauer (1997) argue that the constructivist

tools should be employed for target language performance and enhance intercultural awareness in a constructivist learning environment.

Participant 1 voiced his uneasiness to use the mailing list created under OLELT because he is not comfortable posting his message. When submitting his entry, he wants it to be perfect since it will be read by other OLELT members.

> One thing about OLELT, I ada sedikit negative thoughts pasal you punya tu [mailing list] ...open to everybody. I prefer face to face have a bit...with privacy.

> Maksudnya you dengan I je yang tau.
>
> [Source: fieldwork transcription notes]

Conclusions

Globalization and internationalization of the world economy posit a great need for educators to possess sound English language proficiency particularly in writing and reading skills. OLELT is an e-training program can be an individual or collaborative activity with online study (synchronous communication) vs. offline study (asynchronous communication mode). It consists of learning modules developed by other learning institutions.

In UiTM case, although the educators are not self directed learners, OLELT can be used by taking into account the sociological and psychological perspective i.e. learners are not autonomous, learning via technology or learning alone is a new concept by introducing a guided self-directed online training to them. It is important to create a culture in which management supports SDL and acknowledges those who take effort to improve their knowledge & skills like English language proficiency through an online learning and training experience.

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