

The Choice Between Tampering With Knowledge and Facilitating Self-Emancipation

Yahya Mat Som*, Gwendolyn S. Ruttenutter

Department of Adult and Career Education, Valdosta State University, Valdosta, 31602, USA

Abstract This paper will discuss a facilitating concept that is derived from meta-analysis research on individual studies about reasoning, evaluative, critical, creative, iterative, analytical, and synthesis skills. Similar studies (i.e. on contemporary skills in the work place) provide evidence that these skills are essential being competitive, in facing the challenges and the dynamic workplace environments, and in dealing with complex and sophisticated technologies. Further, these studies contend that employees who possess these skills are more effective and efficient in solving problems, identifying exemplary performances, avoiding pitfalls, increasing productivity, and identifying opportunities.

Keywords Training, Emancipation, Empowerment

1. Introduction

What is a meaningful learning experience? Is it the specific outcome of a learning endeavor, which the facilitator wants the trainees to achieve? Or is it the acquirement of transferable skills that the trainees will be able to use in challenging and diverse workplace situations? In a less complex organizational system and structure, less advanced services, marginal products development, or when a work situation involves easy and simple decisions, the importance and versatility of high order thinking skills may not be crucial. In this situation, training that involves the attainment of basic skills outcomes should be able to meet the demand of the workplace. On the other hand, when an organizational system, culture, or work processes are sophisticated and advanced, training that involves the development of transferrable skills is essential and is more effective to produce the desired business outcomes.

In the early 20th century, the Fordism mass production strategy was the envy of all types of manufacturing industries. During this period, service industries were the new business necessities; customization of products and services was not the primary concern of business industries or government agencies (Gartmen, 2009). However, after the Second World War, when major corporations and developed countries were expanding their influence to dominate the world resources (i.e. tangible, intangible, and human) and to advance their political agenda and/or to make bigger profits, the need for personalization and customization of products

and services became a new attraction and concern. This new globalization culture has prompted international corporations to realize that the old ways of doing business were no longer viable in more competitive business environments. This situation became even more compelling when Edward Deming was successful in revolutionizing the Japanese manufacturing industries with his Total Quality Management (TQM) approach (Aguayo & Deming, 2010). Today, almost every theory and approach to managing the workplace are influenced by the TQM approach. This new way of increasing workplace productivity and effectiveness not only influenced business and industry's management approach, but it also successfully changed workplace cultures around the world from top-down and centralized approach to bottom-up and decentralized approach (Gilbert, 1999).

Contrary to the success of big corporations and developed countries in customizing their products and services to better serve their customers and citizens, the governments and corporations in the developing and underdeveloped countries are still far away from adopting the new strategy. It discussed in the literature, businesses and government agencies in these countries ignore the importance of empowerment, delegation, decentralization, and democratization of authority. Although some of these corporations and government agencies claimed to have implemented the new strategy, in reality these organizational structures maintained the rigid and bureaucratic business cultures where flexibility is considered management weakness. This situation not only impedes the process of modernizing their ways of doing business, but it also has created confusion and uncertainty. Further, the organizations that were interested in promoting the shared governance concept of management were facing many setbacks due to the social system, culture, and tradition

* Corresponding author:

ymatsom@valdosta.edu (Yahya Mat Som)

Published online at <http://journal.sapub.org/mm>

Copyright © 2013 Scientific & Academic Publishing. All Rights Reserved

that are influenced by strict hierarchical structure (Oberthür & Rosendal, 2013). Adding insult to the injury, the resistance to change was stronger when the educational systems of these countries failed to promote learning that focuses on the development of transferrable skills, such as the reasoning, evaluative, critical, creative, analytical, and synthesis skills. Instead learning endeavors primarily emphasize iterative skills.

In the pursuit of a meaningful learning experience, what actually needs to happen and how should the learners be involved? These two questions can be answered from multiple perspectives, and the relevancy of the answers depends on the context from which the information is drawn and concluded. Viewing this subject from the spirit of the self-emancipation, the author addresses the topic from the “prevalent disease” in the developing countries where segregation of authority because of status level has led to the suppression of ideas, inability to make viable business decisions, and lowering of productivity in all sectors of the society (Oberthür & Rosendal, 2013).

2. The Choices and Challenges Facing Organizations

The typical training program in an organization is concerned with how the skills that were acquired in the training programs can be used to assist employees and the organization to overcome their competitive disadvantage, combat negative attitude and low performance, and overcome knowledge and skills inequalities (Martin, 1999). These concerns stem from one business goal, which is to make the best products and services, thus securing profitable business outcomes. With such a narrow focus of what constitutes sustainable long-term success, training and professional programs place substantial emphasis on iterative skills development. The driving force underlying this mindset is based on the assumption that the reproduction of knowledge and skills is the best way to improve employee performance (Rothwell, Hohne, & King, 2007). While this notion of performance improvement is true to some extent, evidence on the ground shows otherwise.

Current literature on human capital and development suggests that the most crucial aspect of performance improvement is when employees, who are faced with challenges, are able to discover new knowledge, skills, and experiences. This finding holds true, as, conversely, skills that are acquired through repetition are simply mechanistic and automatic. They are less scalable and will not transfer efficiently and effectively to a new or unfamiliar situation, or when the ensuing situation lacks the ingredients to which the skills can be applied (Rothwell, Hohne, & King, 2007).

In contrast, successful organizations and profitable businesses in developed nations place employee empowerment and interdependency as one of their core business-values. This approach promotes the use of employee decision-making processes and develops a sense

of ownership in the organization where the employees work.. Thompson (2000) observed that the success of this approach depends on the willingness of an organization to develop and apply useful knowledge, skills, and experience among employees and to allow employees to reflect upon their experience with each other. This opportunity leads employees to create deeper insight and understanding about their work, and to participate more fully in solving workplace problems, which, in turn, enables them to deal with change more effectively. On top of this, employees are also learning from their own and other employees' experiences about the common workplace problems, challenges, and struggles that can then inform business decisions and actions for change.

The process of freeing employees from simply relying on the “traditional way” or the “set truth” in dealing with workplace situations is not an easy goal to accomplish. This process is even more challenging when the upper level management were trained and promoted using the very approach the employees want to abolish. Also, in many cases, the management views empowerment and self-emancipation of employees as a threat to their own belief system in which employees are hired to follow orders (Cranton, 1994). These employees are not employed to free themselves from the very authority that limits the employees' options and that controls the employees' lives.

Mezirow (2001) emphasized that individuals who gain knowledge, skills, and experience through critical self-reflection can free themselves from the prevalent business culture that impedes high order thinking skills. Although this objective can be achieved and can be beneficial to the organization, emancipatory learning is often a difficult and painful process. The most common obstacles to self-emancipation in the workplace include: a) the employees lack confidence in themselves; b) the organization does not have the proper resources and organizational structure to support the change; c) a highly profit-driven organization focuses on instant success and immediate results that are tied to bottom-line; d) upper-level management believes that changes come from the top-down and that a centralized business structure will give them greater authority; and e) federal and state laws and regulations place greater accountability on the organization to protect the employees. While some of these concerns are legitimate, the desire of the organization's leaders to empower their employees can be the first step toward future change.

3. The Development of Knowledge, Skills, and Experience

Literature on adult learning and development contends that successful learning occurs when the acquired knowledge is meaningful to the learners. Literature embraces facilitations that promote a democratic learning environment that encourages reasoning, evaluative, analytical, synthesis,

creative, and critical thinking skills. The message is clear that the potent way to prepare employees for maximizing their abilities to function in society and in the workplace is to have a holistic learning approach. Synergetic learning endeavors can maximize learning experiences, will improve the learner's ability to tap his "unrealized" potentials and strengths, and apply his skills beyond the classroom. Brookfield (1991), one of the foremost leading experts in adult education asserted that learning must be problem- and experience-centered, and that the learning experience must be meaningful. In addition, the learner must be given the opportunity to experience the empowerment of responsibilities, the democratization of learning approaches and goals, and that the education and training environment must be culturally contextualized, customized, and decentralized.

In general, for organizations to be successful in empowering their employees, the training and professional development programs should include transferrable skills topics. Although many training professionals claim to incorporate these skills in their training curricula, many experts refute this claim. There is overwhelming evidence that training programs and curricula are designed with the goal to improve the tangible skills, with less focus given to improving the intangible experience Brookfield (1991). This prevalent attitude of preference for tangible skill development is understandable as the development of these skills is more easily quantified and measured, when contrasted with intangible skill development.

In contrast, research in neuroscience on multisensory brain function and the brain's plasticity reveal that the attainment of the specific tangible skills involves short-term memory. This type of memory allows a person to make "conscious" decisions based on the tangible data that are available at the moment the behavior or situation occurs. Nevertheless, the "sub-conscious or unconscious" everyday decisions, which are the majority of one's decisions, are influenced by the long-term memory. In other words, a person primarily makes decisions automatically, based on characteristics of his/her memory that were shaped by prior experiences. These impulses are remembered by the neuron, and are ready to be "unconsciously" fired by the synapses when the context of the moment the action is taking place is favorable and has similar elements and ingredients as the prior experience (Bear, Connors, & Paradiso, 2006). These findings validate the assumption made by Brookfield (1986) that no one can predict with total certainty how an adult will respond to new ideas, interpretations, skill sets, experiences, or materials. Therefore, the need for education and training programs to address the intangible skills, which are influenced by the unconscious mind, are more critical today with the discovery, and new understanding, of how human brain processes and stores information.

Below are brief definitions, explanations, and reasoning why the intangible skills are crucial components in training or professional programs.

3.1. Reasoning Thinking Skill

This skill refers to specific cognitive abilities, including assessing probability and thinking systematically or abstractly (Fischhoff, 1999). It is the cognitive ability that enhances one's ability to understand logic by observing or internalizing patterns of behaviors and/or situations. This skill is important in developing greater autonomy in employees, especially when they encounter challenges and uncertainties in their decision-making processes because they are faced with too many choices available at the time the situation occurs. In general, reasoning skills are grouped in two categories: a) in inductive reasoning the employee draws general principles from specific instances; and b) in deductive reasoning the employee draws specific conclusions from general principles or premises of the situations (Bransford & Stein, 1993). In most workplace situations both types of reasoning skills are needed, as the inductive reasoning is used to formulate assumptions, and the deductive reasoning is applied to the specific situation for problem solving.

3.2. Critical Thinking Skill

This skill is the ability of an individual to view and explain patterns of behaviors and situations from various perspectives. It involves the intellectually disciplined process of actively engaging information that is collected and generated through observation and direct involvement with the situations or behaviors (Scriven, 1996). In essence, critical thinking employs self-corrective criteria, concepts, and principles to assess the validity of situations. In addition, it involves meta-cognition in performing specific tasks, and in systematically controlling and removing ambiguity by using the available information at the moment the situation occurs. Successful organizations place special emphasis on critical thinking skills so that their employees are enabled to make continuous improvement with less supervision and instruction from the upper-level management. Also, such workplace culture is found to be beneficial when the organization is dealing with constant change in customers' demands, frequent improvement of work processes, and uncertainties of the market-driven economy (Paul & Elder, 2002)

3.3. Analytical Thinking Skill

This skill is the ability of an individual to break down information into smaller chunks so as to understand the underlying reasons for certain things to happen. This process involves systematically examining a situation, organizing information, and identifying key elements of the situation that may be causing the problems, concerns, and challenges. In essence, critical thinking skills allows an individual to use experience and knowledge to effectively discern and compare the available information at the moment the instance occurs, before reaching a conclusion (Paul & Elder, 2007). Employees with strong critical thinking skills will skillfully define and clarify the logic of the problems,

patterns, trends, and issues without egocentric and/or socio-centric bias. Such an attitude enhances the organization's ability to solve problems accurately with wider choice of interventions, value-laden priority, and workable solutions. As a result, employees will be able to render accurate judgments that, in turn, benefit the organization, as well as the customers.

3.4. Creative Thinking Skill

This skill involves the ability to formulate or discover ideas or actions outside of the conventional norm. Creative thinking skills can be grouped in three categories: a) the creative cognitive ability is the skill that allows an individual to invent and imagine something new, using an independent, flexible, and open mind; b) the creative attitude skill is the ability to accept changes, and to foster the habit of improving work situations or life instances; and c) the creative process skill is the ability to make gradual alterations and refinements to one's works (Amabile, 1983). Successful employees possess all three types of creative thinking skills and they can apply them simultaneously when facing challenges and uncertainties in their workplace. Further, creative thinking skills are one of the most important skills required of employees, as thinking creatively increases an organization's competitiveness and ability to respond imaginatively to dynamic and frequent workplace changes.

3.5. Evaluative Thinking Skill

This skill is the ability of an individual to judge and determine the worth and merit of patterns of behaviors and trends of situations. This skill involves using a resource-intensive process that focuses on facts, as well as value-laden judgment. Employees with strong evaluative thinking skills consider a wide variety of organizational factors before reaching a holistic decision. An employee's decision-making process considers the formative and summative evaluation processes (Brookhart, 2010). An organization will benefit from an employee's decision-making ability in two ways: a) when continuous changes occur in a complex situation; and b) when emerging challenges inform a final decision or solution. As a result, the leaders of the organization can focus their work on leading and managing the company, instead of micromanaging their employees.

3.6. Synthesis Thinking Skill

This skill is the ability of an individual to integrate pieces of information using present experience, knowledge, and skills to form a new experience, formulate new knowledge, and develop new skills. It involves intelligently putting together relevant information from disparate sources and/or unique situations, i.e. the relationship among the situations lacks clarity, in order for the solution to make sense and be relevant in the context (Gardner, 2006). In general, for employees whose responsibilities include various segments of the organization and include dealing with a dynamic

workplace environment, the quality of the employees' decisions depends on their synthesis thinking skills. An organization that provides opportunity to its employees to improve their synthesis thinking skills will be better positioned to absorb external shocks, and to cope with the internal organizational dynamics that affect their products, services and works processes.

In this view, where skill development and applications are highly influenced by the long-term memory, businesses and organizations, through their training and professional development programs, should exploit the brain's ability to shape the intangible. Further, studies in performance improvement show that to maximize several foundational skills the application of intangible skills is essential (Hattie, 2008). Possessing these intangible skills allows employees to assume multiple roles, to be versatile, and to make the right decisions with less supervision.

4. Conclusions

In general, organizations and governments need system, culture, and work processes that are sophisticated and advanced. This can be accomplished through education and/or training programs that develop the necessary transferrable skills so vital to compete globally. These skills will promote an attitude of interdependency toward work and life. Developing these skills is a win-win approach. The empowerment opportunity leads to an increase in self-esteem, in turn improving employees' loyalty to the organization where they work, and increasing their patriotism to the country. On a larger scale, for countries to be competitive, and for their citizens to be productive, these skills must be developed at all educational levels. In the nutshell, "culturization" of these skills into the lifestyle of a nation should be the top priority in the 21st century and beyond.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aguayo, R., & Deming, W. (2010). *Dr. Deming: The American who Taught the Japanese About Quality*. New York; NY: Millennia Management Associates, Ltd.
- [2] Amabile, T. M. (1983). *The social psychology of creativity*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- [3] Bear, M., Connors, B., & Paradiso, M. (2006). *Neuroscience: Exploring the Brain*. Baltimore; MD: Lippincotts Williams & Wilkins.
- [4] Bransford, J.D., & Stein, B.S. (1993). *The Ideal Problem Solver* (2nd Ed.). New York: W.H. Freeman.
- [5] Brookhart, S. (2010). *How to Assess Higher-Order Thinking Skills in Your Classroom* by Susan M. Brookhart. Alexandria; VA: ASCD.
- [6] Brookfield, S. (1991). *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning: A Comprehensive Analysis of Principles and Effective Practices*. San Francisco; CA: Jossey-Bass.

- [7] Cranton, C. (1994). Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 3-21.
- [8] Fischhoff, B. (1992). Risk taking: A developmental perspective. In J.F. Yates (Ed.), Risk-Taking Behavior, (pp. 133-162). Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons.
- [9] Gardner, H. (2006). Five minds for the future. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- [10] Gartman, D. (2009). From Autos to Architecture: Fordism and Architectural Aesthetics in The Twentieth Century. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- [11] Gilbert, M. (1999). A History of the Twentieth Century, Volume III: 1952-1999. New York NY: HarperCollins Publisher.
- [12] Hattie, J. (2008). Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement. New York; NY: Routledge.
- [13] Oberthür, S.. & Rosendal, K. (2013) Global Governance of Genetic Resources: Access and Benefit Sharing after the Nagoya Protocol (Routledge Research in Global Environmental Governance). New Yprk' NY: Routledge.
- [14] Paul, R.. & Elder, L. (2002). Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Professional and Personal Life. Upper Saddle River; NJ: Pearson Education.
- [15] Paul, R. & Elder, L. (2007). The Thinker's Guide to Analytic Thinking. Upper Saddle River; NJ: Pearson Education.
- [16] Rothwell, J, Hohne, C.. & King, S. (2007). Human Performance Improvement, Second Edition: Building Practitioner Competence (Improving Human Performance). Burlington; MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.