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The role of learning environments in civil service professional development training

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Abstract

This study seeks to address the complexity of impacts of the learning environment on the efficiency of adult learning in professional development training. The systematic approach to the learning environment and its constituents provides the opportunity for analyzing the factors of key importance with special focus on the choice of the training methods and techniques that facilitate the learning process. The study presents the philosophical and epistemological reasoning on the one hand and the empirical evidence based on the findings of quantitative and qualitative research carried out by the author in the specific context of the civil service profession in the United States. The synthesis of research results is provided with an emphasis on practical applications in a highly encouraging learning environment that facilitates interaction, experiential learning, reflection, and enhances improved workplace performance. The comparative approach resulting from the author's experiences in the Hungarian civil service training highlights the opportunities for benchmarking.

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1. Introduction

Learning environments comprise the complexity of factors that vary in scope and flexibility as well as the extent to which they can be influenced, modified or adjusted to the specific needs of the adult learners. The qualitative and quantitative research carried out by the author in the civil service professional development field in the U.S. in 2010 and her practical experience as a trainer in Hungary equally prove that the learning environment is a key to the impacts and choices that are highly responsible for the synergy and the efficiency of the learning process. It is

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especially true when the main objective is to generate change of attitudes as it has been in the “Ethics and Integrity” and the “Integrity Management” training programs, in which more than seven thousand Hungarian civil servants, including senior staff were involved in 2013-14.

The study focuses on the exploration of the macro- and the micro-level elements of the learning environment with special regard to the teaching methods that can facilitate meaningful engagement in professional development learning in the specific context of the civil service training. The main intention of the study is to seek best practices and benchmarking opportunities for the Hungarian civil service. Despite the growing importance of online and virtual learning environments, our attention is paid to the traditional classroom, which is often far from being suitable or efficient for adult learning.

We believe that professional development is a special field for benchmarking as highly qualified, intellectually demanding ‘knowledge work’ encouraging creative problem-solving, learning on the job, and career prospects is rapidly gaining popularity worldwide. Comparison shows that Hungary is lagging behind the U.S., therefore the adaptation of best practices could be of real benefit. In 2002 70% of the American civil service employees already belonged to this category. (Freyss, 2002) In the Eastern European region, including Hungary, in 2007 this rate was merely 29% below the European average (Rudinger & McVerry, 2007, p. 21).

2. Systemic Approach

In the interpretation of the research, the multidisciplinary framework of the analyzed training field, extends the notion of the learning environments to a) the historically, socially and culturally embedded civil service and public administration dimensions; b) the institutional and organizational system in which civil service training i.e. civil service Human Resource Development (HRD) is taking place; and c) the philosophical and epistemological background and the underlying beliefs of the training practices.

The broader interpretation of the learner-centered learning environment covers the fairly stable and relatively slowly changing dimensions such as the economic, social, cultural, and professional background that provide the historically determined framework conditions of the learning environment. (Komenczi, 2009) In terms of the civil service training field the multidisciplinary framework comprises the public administration dimension with its institutional system and organizational culture including HRD on the one hand, and the approaches to adult learning and training that most efficiently serve the needs and the demands of the target groups and their organizations on the other.

Narrowing the scope of the analysis we can focus on factors that are more flexible to change, like the underlying assumptions of the training practices, the physical setting, e.g. room design, group size, methods and techniques, teaching materials, media, or technology. The personality and the expertise of the trainer and the micro-climate he or she can create in the group have an invaluable contribution to training outcomes. These components of the learning environment can more easily be adapted to the specific needs and objectives of the learners. At the same time they reflect the preferences and choices of the educator/trainer, which directly influence the setting and the atmosphere of a training event.

2.1. Macro-level elements

Grounded choices need the understanding of the reasons behind them, the underlying theories and principles that are especially important when comparisons are overarching continents: in these cases, besides the convergent elements, there are even more historical and socio-cultural differences (Maroti, 2010) as in the development tendencies of the civil service systems on the two continents. The European and the American models basically differ in their interpretation of the role and the power of the state: opposed to the dominant European state, strong local communities and local governance were created in the U. S. to counterbalance the centrally regulated hierarchical state machinery typical of its European counterparts. (Stillman, 1994)

In spite of the evident differences between the historical development and the practice of the American and the Hungarian civil service systems, the global challenges of the past decades have brought about new paradigms and solutions that tend to narrow the traditional gaps, and have generated new goals and objectives that require similar approaches to the professional development of the Hungarian civil service personnel, thus justifying benchmarking

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