

**Work-Based Learning Research Colloquium  
March 6-7, 2003  
Washington, D.C.**

## **Discussion Summary**

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Center for Governmental Studies  
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## Work-Based Learning Research Colloquium Discussion Summary

On March 6-7, 2003, thirty-five researchers and practitioners from business, government, labor and education and six project staff members attended the Work-Based Learning Research Colloquium in Washington, D.C. (a list of attendees is provided in Appendix A). The colloquium was convened by the Institute for Work and the Economy (IWE), an applied research and policy development organization staffed through Northern Illinois University's Center for Governmental Studies. The colloquium is one component of the Work-Based Learning Project funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Other project partners include DTI Associates, contractor for the project, and the Conference Board of Canada.

Five meeting objectives were addressed over the course of two days. These included:

1. Agreeing upon key elements of a consensus definition for "work-based learning" and related terms;
2. Identifying gaps in research studies or major factors to be addressed in a revised literature review;
3. Establishing appropriate topics for a work-based learning research agenda;
4. Identifying additional stakeholders in work-based learning research to engage in this discussion; and
5. Fostering future work-based learning research collaborations by providing opportunities for the participants to network.

Discussion points addressing the first three objectives are summarized below. Feedback from the participants during and after the colloquium suggests that the fourth objective was also addressed, but time will reveal whether any new or continuing research partnerships resulted from the event.

### 1. Definition of Adult Work-Based Learning

A larger framework for adult work-based learning was identified that comprised three elements:

- Formal work-based education
- Informal learning
- Self-education and self-directed learning

A proposed definition of work-based learning presented in the literature review focused primarily on the first of these elements, formal work-based education, but the consensus was that it was a good beginning. This proposed definition was:

***Work-based learning*** is the individual's acquisition and construction of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to obtain, maintain and increase meaningful employment. While learners access a variety of formal and informal learning opportunities for this purpose, a principal source is work-based education. ***Work-based education*** encompasses the following characteristics:

- **Learner.** Work-based education is designed to assist employed, underemployed and unemployed workers at all skill and occupational levels.
- **Venue.** Work-based education may be provided in a variety of educational, workplace and community settings. For incumbent workers it is more likely to be held in the workplace or post-secondary educational institution and for unemployed and underemployed workers it is more likely to be provided at adult learning centers or other community sites.
- **Aegis.** Work-based education can be sponsored by a workplace, union or professional or trade association or in partnership with one of those entities.
- **Direction.** The course of instruction is generated from the students' goals in specific educational areas or from the employers' needs for productivity, safety or advancement.
- **Content.** Work-based education addresses foundational workplace knowledge, skills and attitudes; career development; workplace-specific occupational requirements; and the range of technical competencies.

More than 40 suggestions were made addressing how this definition might be strengthened, out of which 12 were identified as priorities for incorporation into this definition. They include:

1. Workers must be included in the design and provision of work-based learning in addition to employers and providers of education and training.
2. The language must move beyond “maintenance” and “self-sufficiency” to fulfilling dreams and engendering hope and opportunity.
3. Recognize what all employees, including those with limited English proficiency, bring to the workplace.
4. Include who benefits and how -- who are we trying to assist and support? This should include keeping people in the workforce and employable and meeting the needs of re-entrants and new entrants.
5. Include the role of credentials and what they bring to the learning process.
6. Include transferable skills.
7. Not a point in time or place – is ongoing, anywhere, anyplace.
8. Address the role of informal learning.
9. Emphasize the importance of context in workplace skill acquisition.
10. Learner participation must be voluntary.
11. Learners' privacy must be protected.
12. Include sectoral-based in the “venue” section.

Workplace education was also defined by the U.S. Department of Education for purposes of legislative reauthorization and program development. USDE's definition is:

an adult basic skills and literacy program that is delivered in partnership with an employer or consortium of employers serving individuals identified for participation by the employer(s) sponsoring the program.

The colloquium participants agreed on revising this definition as follows:

An adult basic skills and literacy program serving individuals in partnership with a sponsoring employer or consortium of employers.

**Follow-Up Action:** IWE staff will revise the definition of work-based learning to incorporate the suggestions from the colloquium and disseminate it to the colloquium participants for final comment. This definition will be shared at the 2003 Workplace Learning Conference to be held in Chicago on December 8-10.

## **2. Revisions to the Literature Review**

Colloquium participants broke into four small groups to discuss the literature review and share any discoveries, gaps and questions arising from the document. The following items were captured by IWE staff during the plenary session small group report-outs.

1. Clarify the audience(s) and purpose of the document
2. Either elaborate on the systems framework or replace it with another approach that captures the complexity of the work-based learning process.
3. Clearly distinguish between correlation and causation in the research.
4. Separate the research from the literature and address the quality of the research included in the review. For example, develop an annotated bibliography or describe the methods used in each item.
5. Emphasize a prospective (21<sup>st</sup> Century) approach rather than one that documents strategies and models used in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (retrospective).
6. Describe the methodology used to decide what was incorporated into the literature review.
7. Add a section that presents the theory used to describe adult work-based learning.
8. Consider using an economic perspective/human capital theory (Becker) or Greene's "Proceed-Precede" model.
9. Address the convergence of adult education and HRD.
10. Make the case for why USDE (in addition to employers) should invest in work-based learning.
11. Address how the definition of workplace basic skills has evolved over the past 20 years.
12. Include other agencies' five-year research plans.

**Follow-Up Action:** The IWE team will consider each of these recommendations and will incorporate as many as is feasible into a second version of the document and shared with colloquium participants.

## **3. Work-Based Learning Research Agenda**

Two sets of research topics were generated by the colloquium. One set addressed research relevant for workplace basic skills and another addressed broader work-based learning issues.

**Workplace Basic Skills Research.** To identify the research questions surrounding workplace basic skills, four small group discussions were held around these questions:

- What causes employers to become engaged and invest in workplace basic skills development?
- What causes workers to develop their basic skills?
- What adult education programs invest in workplace basic skills development and why?
- What is the construct for research on forward-looking systems in adult basic skills?

Small group discussions generated the following research topics associated with each of these questions.

#### Employer Engagement

1. What type of training is considered successful?
2. How do we generate ROI for basic skills? What is the risk of non-investment?
3. What's the context within which employers currently invest in basic skills development (e.g. OSHA, ISO, etc.)? Does this vary by market segments or geography? What about programs funded only with private dollars?
4. What's the research base for defining basic skills?
5. How can USDE's investment in workplace education be leveraged to increase business interest?
6. How do we identify, measure and improve "invisible" basic skills development?
7. What basic skills development strategies are effective with small- and medium-sized employers?
8. What is the role of the intermediary?
9. What is the role of labor and labor management in basic skills development?

#### Learner Incentives/Motivation

10. Why are people motivated to learn basic skills in the context of a rational decision-making model (e.g. better job opportunity, catastrophic event)?
11. What are the conditions/context for individuals to learn basic skills?
12. What helps individuals come to basic skills learning opportunities (e.g. child care, accessibility, tuition reimbursement)?
13. What keeps learners in an education and training setting (e.g. learners' life context is addressed and incorporated into educational materials, learner ability to see the next step, different learning styles addressed, navigational aids to facilitate the learning process)?
14. What is the role of credentialing in motivating basic skills attainment?
15. What are the impediments to basic skills acquisition?

#### Adult Education Programs

16. Who establishes adult basic skills programs (e.g. associations, technical colleges, Workforce Investment Boards, private companies, universities, states) and why?
17. What are the characteristics and context that enable work-based basic skills programs to persist (sustainability)? What barriers have to be overcome?
18. What impact did USDE's initial investment in workplace basic skills have on the host states?

### Future-Oriented Learning Constructs

19. What is future work? What are the leading indicators for changes in basic skills? What are universal skill sets? What skills can be adapted or transferred? (Consider an RFP comparing methods for predicting future skills, e.g. scenarios, forecasting, trend analysis, and use of secondary sources.)
20. How do we capture the value of current basic skills? Their evolution or depreciation? Are we overskilled?
21. How do demographic projections impact training?
22. How do work-based assessments align to academic standards? What are the metrics to link performance/learning to assessment? What is the translation between employer job performance assessments and basic academic skills?
23. What are the implications of current educational and scientific research (e.g. simulations and brain scan research for challenged learners) for getting ahead of the curve in workplace learning?
24. What staff requirements and professional development are associated with a future orientation?

***Broader Work-Based Learning Research Agenda.*** Research topics for a range of work-based learning issues and questions surfaced throughout the two days of the colloquium. They are listed here in their entirety.

1. How do we increase business investment in work-based learning? Why do companies support work-based learning without public subsidies or a labor-management agreement?
2. How can USDE workplace basic skills funding be leveraged to increase its impact?
3. What are the lessons from School-to-Work and School-to-Careers for adult basic education?
4. What instructional improvement ideas may be found through international and cross/cultural comparisons?
5. What are the implications of demographics for work-based learning (e.g. immigration and ESL, multiple career changes, staying in the workforce longer, the nature of the skills gap)?
6. Will the marketplace pay for credentials? Does the value of the credential depend on the credentialing agency? What are the unintended consequences of skill certification?
7. What work-based learning program characteristics correlate to success?
8. How do we measure, assess and credential information learning?
9. Who has dollars to support work-based learning?
10. What is the difference between skills for work and skills for training?
11. What personal barriers interfere with learning?
12. How can ethnographic research help us better understand outcomes?
13. What are the staff needs for delivering quality work-based learning?
14. Which institutions are most successful with which populations? Why are they successful? What practices are working?
15. What are the needs of limited English-proficient workers and how can they be addressed? How effective are varying types of ESL instruction? What industries are doing vocational ESL well? How can the cultural competence of those entering the workforce be enhanced?

16. What are the training and learning needs of small business and how can they be met?
17. How does work organization stimulate learning?
18. What is the impact of business size on education and training?
19. What is the relationship between outcome-based accountability systems and creaming?
20. How do we generalize from the workplace to families and communities?
21. What is the impact of adult literacy programs on learners over time? What do longitudinal studies of adult education interventions tell us?
22. What is the relationship between human capital and human management systems? How do they relate to performance management?
23. How can we connect work-based learning to regional economic development?
24. How do we address the issue of silos caused by multiple agencies and their funding streams?
25. How do special needs learners move into the workplace? What is gained and lost by not funding the continuing development of special needs learners?
26. Investigate the mechanisms (e.g. language) used to mediate between education and training and positive business outcomes. Literacy may be a marker for something else.
27. Social marketing: what are the messages we use and don't use to talk about work-based learning and literacy.
28. What is the relationship of power to education and training? In what ways do workers perceive the push to training?
29. What role can trade associations play as intermediaries/brokers?
30. What is and could be the role of public libraries in work-based learning?
31. How do we move people from the second to the third level of functional literacy?
32. What is the relationship between literacy and innovation?

**Follow-Up Action:** IWE staff will use this list to identify the key research issues for workplace basic skills and work-based learning and incorporate these issues into the literature review. For each of these issues, staff will:

- summarize the findings for those research issues that have been addressed;
- determine which issues have been addressed but the research needs to be revisited for purposes of reliability and validity; and
- identify which issues have not yet been addressed.

#### **4. Additional Stakeholders to Engage**

The concluding session of the colloquium addressed who else should be brought into this discussion regarding work-based learning research and how to advance the discussion. *General* categories of stakeholders included:

- Business and industry
- Unions
- All federal departments and programs that support work-based learning and adult literacy
- Learners
- Education and training providers
- Faith-based organizations
- Trade associations

- Community colleges
- Libraries
- Foundations

The following *specific* entities also were identified as having a stake in work-based learning:

- U.S. Department of Defense Educational Agency
- U.S. Department of Commerce – NIST
- U.S. Department of Agriculture
- U.S. Department of Labor – Employment and Training Administration
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families programs)
- World Bank
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
- Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)
- U.S. Department of Transportation
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Social Security Administration (Ticket to Work)
- National Committee on U.S.-China Relations
- U.S. Agency for International Development
- United Kingdom’s basic skills agency

Action steps suggested by colloquium participants included:

1. Identifying the work-based learning standards associated with various funders;
2. Forming a discussion list among colloquium participants using key research questions and creating activity around them;
3. Understanding USDE’s agenda and plan for moving people closer to success;
4. Using the LINCS Special Collection on Workforce Development as a dissemination vehicle;
5. Using the research agenda as a way to break down the silos among federal departments (a reverse Request for Proposal process was one suggestion); and
6. Determining the relationship between national and state work-based learning agendas.

***Follow-Up Actions.*** IWE staff will use these suggestions to advance the larger USDE-funded Work-Based Learning Project and to shape the strands and presenters for the December Work-Based Learning Conference.

**Appendix A**  
**Work-Based Learning Research Colloquium Attendees**

Laurie Bassi, Ph.D.  
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