Université de Montréal

# Les antécédents à la participation aux activités de formation chez le personnel de soutien à un collège en Ontario

(The antecedents to participation in learning activities among support staff at a college in Ontario)

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# RESUME

Les tendances de la participation à la formation des adultes au Canada n'ont pas évolué depuis des décennies, malgré les nouvelles influences économiques qui ont stimulé l'augmentation et la diversification permanente de la formation des employés et malgré les initiatives plus nombreuses en faveur de l'apprentissage des employés en milieu de travail. Il est donc nécessaire de ne plus se contenter d'étudier les prédicteurs de la formation déjà connus dans les profils des employés et des employeurs. Il est, en revanche, indispensable d'étudier les antécédents de la participation des employés à la formation, y compris les aspects et les étapes du processus qui la précède. Cette étude porte sur les antécédents de la participation des employés aux formations dans un important collège communautaire urbain en Ontario.

Afin de préparer le recueil des données, un cadre théorique a été élaboré à partir du concept d'expression de la demande. Ce cadre implique l'existence d'un processus qui comporte plusieurs étapes, au cours desquelles plusieurs intervenants interagissent et dont la formation est susceptible d'être le résultat.

Les résultats de l'enquête sur le profil d'apprentissage ont permis de conclure que le comportement des employés et de l'employeur est conforme aux modèles de prédicteurs existants et que les taux et les types de participation étaient similaires aux tendances nationales et internationales.

L'analyse des entrevues d'un groupe d'employés atypiques, de leurs superviseurs, ainsi que de représentants du collège et du syndicat, a révélé d'importants thèmes clés : l'expression de la demande n'est pas structurée et elle est communiquée par plusieurs canaux, en excluant parfois les superviseurs. De plus, la place de l'auto-évaluation est

importante, ainsi que la phase de prise de décision. Ces thèmes ont souligné l'interaction de plusieurs intervenants dans le processus d'expression de la demande d'apprentissage et pendant la prise de décision. L'examen des attentes de chacun de ces intervenants au cours de ce processus nous a permis de découvrir un désir tacite chez les superviseurs et les employés, à savoir que la conversation soit à l'initiative de « l'autre ».

Ces thèmes clés ont été ensuite abordés dans une discussion qui a révélé une discordance entre le profil de l'employeur et les profils des employés. Celle-ci se prête à la correction par l'employeur de son profil institutionnel pour l'harmoniser avec le profil dispositionnel des employés et optimiser ainsi vraisemblablement son offre de formation. Ils doivent, pour cela, appliquer un processus plus systématique et plus structuré, doté de meilleurs outils. La discussion a porté finalement sur les effets des motivations économiques sur la participation des employés et a permis de conclure que, bien que les employés ne semblent pas se méfier de l'offre de formation de l'employeur et que celle-ci ne semble pas non plus les décourager, des questions de pouvoir sont bel et bien en jeu. Elles se sont principalement manifestées pendant le processus de prise de décision et, à cet égard, les superviseurs comme les employés reconnaissent qu'un processus plus structuré serait bénéfique, puisqu'il atténuerait les problèmes d'asymétrie et d'ambiguïté.

Les constatations de cette étude sont pertinentes pour le secteur de la formation des adultes et de la formation en milieu de travail et, plus particulièrement, pour la méthodologie de recherche. Nous avons constaté l'avantage d'une méthodologie à deux volets, à l'écoute de l'employeur et des employés, afin de mieux comprendre la relation entre l'offre de formation et la participation à la formation. La définition des antécédents de la participation sous la forme d'un processus dans lequel plusieurs

intervenants remplissent plusieurs rôles a permis de créer un modèle plus détaillé qui servira à la recherche future. Ce dernier a démontré qu'il est indispensable de reconnaître que la prise de décision constitue une étape à part entière, située entre l'expression de la demande et la participation à la formation. Ces constatations ont également révélé qu'il est véritablement indispensable que le secteur de la formation des adultes continue à traiter les questions reliées à la reconnaissance de la formation informelle.

Ces conclusions et la discussion sur les constatations clés nous ont inspiré des recommandations à appliquer pour modifier les retombées du processus précédant la participation des employés à la formation. La majorité de ces recommandations ont trait à l'infrastructure de ce processus et ciblent donc principalement l'employeur. Certaines recommandations sont cependant destinées aux syndicats, aux superviseurs et aux employés qui peuvent aider l'employeur à remplir son rôle et favoriser la participation efficace de tous à ce processus. Les recommandations qui précédent impliquent que ce sont les antécédents de la formation qui gagneraient à être plus structurés et non la formation elle-même. La structuration de l'infrastructure de l'apprentissage présente cependant des risques à elle seule. En liaison avec ce phénomène, une étude spécifique des effets de la nature, de la qualité et de l'asymétrie de la relation superviseur-employé sur la participation des employés à la formation serait bénéfique.

Mots clés : formation en entreprise, formation professionnelle continue, antécédents à la participation, employés de soutien

# ABSTRACT

Trends in adult learning participation in Canada have remained unchanged for decades. This is despite emerging economic pressures to increase and widen continuous employee participation in learning and despite increased efforts towards employee learning in the workplace. This means that there is a need to go beyond examining the already well-established learning predictor profiles of employees and employers. There is in fact a need to examine the antecedents to participation, including aspects and steps of the process that precedes participation. This study set out to research the antecedents to participation in employer-sponsored learning among the support staff population in a large, urban community college in Ontario.

In preparation for the data collection, a theoretical framework was developed based on the concept of expression of demand. This framework implies that there is a multi-step process involving interactions between several parties and wherein participation may be the outcome.

Based on the results of the *Learning Profile Survey*, the employees and the employer were found to be behaving according to existing predictor models and the rates and types of participation were similar to national and international trends.

The analysis of the interviews conducted among a group of atypical employees, their supervisors, as well as with representatives from the college and from the union, revealed important key themes: informality of the expression of demand through multiple channels, sometimes excluding the supervisors, the reliance on self-assessment, and the importance of the decision-making phase. These themes reinforced the fact that there are several parties interacting during the process of expressing demand for learning and

during decision-making. By examining the expectations of each party during the process, we uncovered a tacit desire by the supervisors and by the employees to have “the other” initiate the conversation.

The key themes were then discussed in relation to the research and knowledge gaps identified as the basis and context for this study. In this light, the misalignment between the employer and the employees’ profiles revealed some opportunities for the employer to address its institutional profile in order to better match the employees’ dispositional profile and thus be more likely to maximize the employer’s learning offer. The deconstruction of the antecedents to participation in learning activities provided insights along the same lines. Here there are opportunities for the employer, the supervisors and the union to better support the employees in the identification of their learning needs and the articulation of their learning demand by providing a more systematic, more formalized process with better tools. This would once again be a better match for the employees’ situational and dispositional profile. Finally, the discussion examined the impact of the economic drivers on the employees’ participation and concluded that even though the employees did not appear suspicious or deterred by the employer’s offer of learning, there are indeed issues of power in play. Those manifested themselves mainly during the decision-making process, and in this regard, both the supervisors and the employees agree that a more formalized process would be beneficial as a way to mitigate the issue of asymmetry and the issue of ambiguity.

The findings of this study have implications for the field of adult education and workplace learning, particularly in regards to research methodology. We found that the use of mix methodology capturing the employer and the employees’ voice was beneficial

in providing new insights about the alignment between the offer and the uptake. The recognition of the antecedents to participation as a process involving several, multi-faceted actors allowed for the creation of a more detailed model useful for further research. It identified the need to separate decision-making as a stand-alone step between the expression of demand and participation in learning. The findings also reinforced the need for the field of adult education to continue to address issues related to the recognition of informal learning.

Based on the results and the discussion of key findings there are several recommendations that can be considered if we are to affect the outcome of the process preceding employee participation in learning. Most of the recommendations pertain to the infrastructure that supports the process and therefore are largely targeted at the employer. However, as the employers consider the implementation of a more solid infrastructure and the use of more intervention methods, there are recommendations for unions, supervisors and for employees that can assist the employer living up to its role and facilitate everyone's effective participation in the process.

The above recommendations imply that it is the antecedents to learning that could benefit from greater formality, not the learning itself. On the other hand, there are risks associated with formalizing even the infrastructure for learning. Future research should further explore the new type of workplace learning participants for whom participation is an expression of control and power over their work. In relation to this phenomenon, a specific study on the impact of the nature, quality and asymmetry of the supervisor-employee relationship on employee participation in learning would be beneficial.

Keywords: workplace learning, antecedents to participation, support staff

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

| | |
|---|---|
| AEP: | Adult Education Participation |
| AES: | Adult Education Survey |
| AETS: | Adult Education Training Survey |
| ASTD: | American Society for Training and Development |
| ACAATO: | Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario |
| CCL: | Canadian Council on Learning |
| CAD: | Canadian Dollars |
| CSQ: | Centrale des Syndicats du Québec |
| CVTS3 : | Continuing vocational training survey |
| CCHRD: | College Committee on Human Resources Development |
| DPS: | Deterrent to Participation Scale |
| EPS: | Education Participation Scale |
| EDS: | Employee Development Scheme |
| EERC: | Employee/Employer Relations Committee |
| HR: | Human Resources |
| HRSDC: | Human Resources and Skills Development Canada |
| HRD: | Human Resources Development |
| IT: | Information Technology |
| ISSTAL: | Interdisciplinary Sequential-Specific Time Allocation Lifespan model |
| LPI: | *Learning Performance Index* |
| NALS: | National Adult Learning Survey |
| NCES: | National Centre for Education Statistics |
| NCSR: | National Centre for Social Research |
| NHES: | National Household Education Survey |
| NFI: | Net Future Institute |
| NALL: | New Approaches to Lifelong Learning |
| OPSEU: | Ontario Public Service Employees Union |
| OECD: | Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| PD: | Professional Development |

TMIR: Training Magazine Industry Report

ULR: Union Labour Representatives

U.K. : United Kingdom

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

U.S.: United States

USD: United States Dollars

WALL: Work and Lifelong Learning Survey

WHMIS: Workplace Hazardous Material Information System

## DEDICATION

À mes parents, pour m'avoir transmis le goût du défi, la valeur de l'éducation, et un désir d'apprendre insatiable.

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# INTRODUCTION

Participation in adult learning has been an important area of research for over a century. Adult learning used to be about ensuring that citizens in rural areas had basic literacy skills to fully participate in their community, vote, and contribute to the literacy of their children. Nowadays it is more about keeping an already skilled workforce up-to-date in a knowledge and technology-based, fast changing, competitive global economy. Either way, there has always been enough to intrigue and challenge those fascinated by the diversity and complexity of the behaviours of adults toward learning. Some adults learn continuously, on their own, on their own time. Some do it by obligation, others by interest. Sometimes it is a course, sometimes it is a book, and sometimes it is about work, but for many it is for pleasure. There are also those who say they choose not to learn. There are those who would like to learn but do not. There are some who do not see a need. There are as many reasons as there are people.

This level of diversity and complexity has posed an interesting challenge in the workplace where the pressure to "learn", in all the ways and forms that it can assume, has become omnipresent. For some employers, becoming familiar with their employees' incentives and barriers to learning in order to widen, increase, sustain participation in learning activities is much more than a lofty, humanistic ideal. It is a reality, a necessity that is here, now, and with very basic, pragmatic business implications.

Despite these emerging social and economic pressures, the trends in adult learning participation are remaining stable. There is therefore a need to continue to improve our understanding of participation if employers are to maximize the learning and performance of their workforce. This means that there is a need to go beyond examining

the already well-established demographic learning profiles of employees and employers. There is in fact a need to examine the antecedents of participation, including all aspects and steps of the process that precedes participation. This also includes examining the roles – initiator, assessor, decision-maker, provider - played by each party during the process. This study sets out to research such concepts in the context of a large, urban community college in Ontario and among its support staff population.

In Chapter 1, the problem statement and the research questions are introduced and complemented by additional background information on the state of learning in the workplace, in Canada and internationally. Chapter 1 also sets the more specific context of the study by describing the knowledge gaps in more detail and relating them to the state of employee learning in Ontario colleges. After clarifying the terminology to be used in the study, the chapter concludes with an overview of the implications and the limitations of the proposed research.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on the key topics being examined in this study. It begins with a thorough synthesis of the employee participation and employer sponsoring trends reported in a number of Canadian and international surveys. This is followed by a review of the literature examining all that precedes the actual participation in learning: the antecedents to participation. This includes a review of the profile predictors for each of the party involved in the process, as a well as an examination of the process itself. A review of the various barriers and reasons for participation identified in the literature is provided in this section as well. A third section is included in this chapter, to allow a discussion on the context of support staff employees and Ontario colleges.

Chapter 3 introduces how the theoretical framework of this study is anchored in four key theoretical concepts: 1) lifelong learning, and consequently adult learning, as a desirable ideal for the prosperity of most countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001); 2) socio-demographic profiles as predictors of participation in formal and informal learning (Doray, Bélanger, & Labonté, 2004; Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006) 3) participation in learning as the result of a process (Bélanger & Federighi, 2000); and 4) facilitators and inhibitors of the process that precedes participation in learning (Bélanger & Voyer, 2004). In this chapter, the theoretical framework is presented as a model, which then shows how each theoretical concept has been adopted and in some cases adapted for the purpose of this study.

The fourth chapter describes the method used for this research. It presents the design of the methodology, including the sampling method. Following this overview, the data collection and treatment plans are introduced along with the matrices that will be used for the data analysis. Once those are reviewed in detail, the chapter concludes by addressing issues of validity and the ways in which the threats will be minimized.

Chapter 5 presents the results of the data collection and an analysis of the findings. The findings are organized and synthesized to systematically provide thorough answers to the research questions introduced in Chapter 1. Once an overall summary of the results is articulated, the final discussion and the conclusion highlight the key theoretical and organizational implications of the research results and propose recommendations contextualized within the limitations of the study.

Overall, this research demonstrates how critical the antecedents to participation in employer-sponsored learning activities are. The process that precedes participation is

influenced by similar socio-demographic factors as participation itself. However, examining the process that precedes participation adds several dimensions to the more static participation-profile models because it introduces multiple interactions between multiple parties. These interactions mean that relationships are at play and that there are important institutional factors framing and supporting the interactions. The abstract and volatile nature of this added dimension relative to its importance means that there is a definite need to pay attention to the way employers engage employees in the entire learning process.

# CHAPTER 1

# PROBLEM STATEMENT

# CHAPTER 1: PROBLEM STATEMENT

This chapter states the problem examined through this study by introducing issues related to employee participation in employer-sponsored learning in the Canadian economic and workforce context, as well as within the field of adult education and lifelong learning. To that end, after articulating the overall problem statement, background information on the evolution and emergence of learning in the workplace is provided along with clarifications on the terms used in this study. This chapter then zooms in on the actual research at hand by introducing the knowledge gaps, the research questions, and by describing the implications and limitations of the study.

## 1.1 The need to uncover the antecedents to employee participation in employer-sponsored learning activities

In a survey of 117 senior executives and managers around the globe conducted by the Net Future Institute (NFI), it was reported that employee participation rates in learning activities remain low in many organizations, despite a high level of learning offered by employers (Whitney, 2007). This divergent behaviour toward the learning offer and the learning uptake, which seems to ring true in Canada (Peters, 2004), points to a widening gap between the employers' and employees' perspective on participation in employer-sponsored learning activities. This trend, and more particularly the causes behind such a misalignment, has yet to be explored in depth. Other than the data describing the offer vis-à-vis the uptake, there is little knowledge available to *explain* the overall low participation phenomenon in Canada.

The Canadian employers and employees who do invest in learning recognize the benefits (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006, 2008, 2009a; Peters, 2004). Yet, the ever increasing emphasis put on learning as a key to individual and business success (Bailey, 2007) is not resulting in more learning. Sponsoring rates and participation rates in fact appear, based on quantitative studies, to be both relatively low and highly specific to certain groups (Goldenberg, 2006; Kim, Hagedorn, Williamson, & Chapman, 2004; LaValle & Blake, 2001; McMullan, 2004; Myers & de Broucker, 2006). However, a closer look at the findings and the methodology of these studies reveals that this may not be a completely accurate picture of what is happening behind the scenes. What exactly is going on - or not going on - between employees and employers that is causing those kinds of patterns to emerge?

There is, in fact, still much left to investigate and clarify in regards to an employer's true sponsoring practices and the employees' process of identifying, expressing and acting on their learning needs. This is in part due to the way research on employer-sponsored learning activities is typically conducted and the way participation surveys are designed. Most common national and international sources of data on adult education and workplace learning, e.g. the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) (2010), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2001), Canadian Council on Learning (2006; 2009a), Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and Statistics Canada (2001), the National Centre for Social Research in the United Kingdom (Fitzgerald, Taylor, & LaValle, 2003) or the National Center for Education Statistics in the United States (Kim et al., 2004), tend to provide extensive quantitative data on the employees

participation rates and / or the employers' sponsoring rates. What are rarely explored in detail are the interactions between employers and employees that lead to the end results reflected in the surveys. The only study coming close to such an analysis is a very recent report, unique in its kind, produced by the *Centre d'études et de recherches sur les qualifications* in France. For the first time the Centre recognized the need to combine and compare data from the Adult education survey representing the voice of the employees with data from the Continuing vocational training survey representing the voice of the employers to produce a new report: *le Dispositif d'information sur la formation employeur-salarié (DIFES1)*. The cross between the two surveys allowed for a correlation between the observations reported by employers and employees and for an analysis of the gap in perception (Lambert, Marion-Vernoux, & Sigot, 2009).

This type of data begins to recognize the presence of an interaction between two parties and the effect it has in creating a third version of reality. By acknowledging this interaction and studying it more in-depth, it is possible to come closer to uncovering influencing factors often overlooked. These factors include power (Kilgore, 2001), control (Filion & Rudolph, 1999), and the asymmetrical relationship between employers and employees (Bratton, 2001). The potentially negative side effects resulting from the recent attention given to learning have surfaced in recent years and critics have begun to warn 'against learning' (Contu, Grey, & Örtenblad, 2003). This points to how many important revealing yet hidden aspects are being missed in traditional studies, including the way learning is identified and expressed in the first place as well as the reasons why employees learn so much on their own

initiative, time and budget (Peters, 2004). The typical national and international studies listed earlier do not explore whether employee participation or employer support came first, the barriers that exist in the workplace, and whether it is the employees or the employers, or both, who are in need of better systems and structures that will support learning.

There is a long way to go before all of these questions can be answered and their implications for workplace learning truly captured. However, there is enough evidence to substantiate the need for employers to maintain or increase their strategic investment in their employees' entire learning process (Australian National Training Authority, 2003; Bailey, 2007; Harris, 2000). Taking this premise as a starting point, it would be worthwhile to explore the process which precedes participation in learning sponsored by employers. This type of investigation would be particularly relevant among low-skilled workers, who are also showing the lowest levels of participation in employer-sponsored learning activities (Peters, 2004). Perhaps this way, continuous improvements can be made to the way learning in the workplace is facilitated.

## 1.2 Background and context

The pressure to increase and widen the participation of adults in learning activities is in part the result of the ongoing discourse among the leaders of developed countries who have identified learning as an emerging solution to achieving and maintaining economic growth and productivity and in turn sustaining national prosperity (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009b; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001). As this section will further describe, governments

and employers are responding to these new economic realities but overall rates of participation in employee learning remain unchanged. It appears as though other issues and barriers are emerging.

### *1.2.1 Learning as the new solution to achieving and maintaining Canadian prosperity*

The need for Canadians to become or remain active learners throughout their lives as a way to succeed in Canada's new knowledge economy has been long forecasted. More than fifteen years ago, some were already writing that in order for Canadians to compete in a global economy, it would be necessary that individuals and institutions develop a value of learning as a continuous lifelong process (Peters & Dery, 1991). The Conference Board of Canada and the Canadian Council on Learning have been making similar statements for a few years as well, linking Canada's prosperity to high performing, and competitive organizations, which they in turn correlate to high levels of "organizational learning" (Bloom & Hughes, 2007; Canadian Council on Learning, 2009b; Cooney & Parker, 2005). In fact, almost every public policy statement of the last decade has been made with these assumptions.

The scenario of the learning society is not quite materializing in the way predicted. As of 2003, less than 20% of the total workforce in Canada was employed in 'knowledge occupations' and many workers were reporting that underemployment was more the norm (Livingstone, 2000; Spencer, 2006). The tertiary sector may have grown tremendously but in Canada, it has not meant a post-industrial era since many of the jobs in the tertiary sector are low-skilled, low-paid jobs in the service industry. Livingstone (2000) also argues that we have already been living in a 'learning

society', based on the high levels of informal learning reported by Canadians. Still, whether in an industrial, post-industrial or knowledge economy, and whether Canadians are already learning on their own, there is still reason to pay attention to the development of the Canadian workforce in the workplace: the skills level required to perform basic work is rising and the pace of change is also accelerating (Human Resources Development and Statistics Canada, 2001). There is also reason for concern when the employers' investment in workforce development does not appear to be keeping pace. The stagnant Canadian statistics in regards to participation of adult in learning activities (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; McMullan, 2004; Peters, 2004) are worrisome. Consequently, participation in learning – and the need to widen and increase it – has been convincingly identified and touted as a "problem" worthy of research and intervention by all those who have been immersed in the data.

### *1.2.2 Government and employer response: an increased focus on learning*

Federal and provincial governments, as well as many employers, appear to have responded to the pressure to pay attention to adult learning. In addition to the emergent knowledge economy and continuous, rapid technological change, the threat of skills shortages based on demographics further contributed to placing lifelong learning and the field of Adult Education in a renewed and ever growing spotlight during the last decade (Canadian Labour and Business Centre, 2001; Ontario Jobs and Investment Board, 1999). As a result, government and employers appear to have reacted in a variety of ways as evidenced by researchers, practitioners, advocates and organizations that have all been at the receiving end of numerous learning-focused

initiatives. Examples of the increased level of attention include, but are not limited to, special projects such as the Lifelong Learning Challenge Fund (TVOntario, 2005), special funding and programs such as the Adult Learner's Week (Canadian Commission for Unesco, 2005), new policies, including "La loi favorisant le développement et la reconnaissance des compétences de la main d'oeuvre – la loi du 1%" in Quebec (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2002), tax credits such as Lifelong Learning Plans (Department of Finance Canada, 1998), new vision statements for Canada which include a focus on continuous learning (Government of Canada, 1999, 2004), and new research agencies such as the Canadian Council on Learning. Other types of evidence in the workplace include the way managers of learning and development are being positioned at the executive table because learning has to be part of the corporate strategy (Davenport, 2006). Some organizations are currently using 'overtraining', as a competitive, success strategy. Overtraining has been described as offering multiple sessions to employees, supervisors and trainers rather than running the risk of problems with a new product launch (Wong, 2006). Meanwhile, others are making significant long term investments in learning infrastructure ("Corporate training's new look," 2001). Learning has never been so omnipresent in business, research, and political circles.

### *1.2.3 New motives but unchanged learning participation patterns*

Despite such high levels of attention, statistics indicate that the level of participation in learning by Canadian adults is not adequate to keep Canada going as a competitive participant and contributor to the first world economy (Bloom & Hughes,

2007). This is not news to the field of Adult Education since the numbers and patterns have been stable over the past 30 to 40 years (Human Resources Development and Statistics Canada, 1997, 2001; Peters, 2004). What is new is the economic perspective being more directly applied to those numbers, patterns and trends. It appears as though a gloomy economic forecast was a greater catalyst in garnering attention than the emancipatory framework advocated by adult educators and researchers in earlier decades. Learning, as originally envisioned and promoted by the Adult Education field, was based on humanistic values and critical theory, with an empowering and democratic goal of the citizen or worker (Faure et al., 1972). However, it is unclear whether the learning being currently promoted in the workplace and the "Learning Organization" (Bloom & Hughes, 2007) being advocated by economists have actually adopted the same framework. This shift in motive may become relevant when attempting to understand and explain the seemingly, stubbornly unchanging participation trends.

### *1.2.4 The potential impact of employer motives on employee participation in learning*

The forces behind the new learning momentum may or may not matter. However, when investigating adult learning participation with the intent to identify strategies to increase and widen it, it will be important to consider whether the motives behind the increasing push does in fact matter to the learner and ultimately, to his or her participation. There is evidence that zooming in on adult learning through a human capital lens can have an impact on the kinds of strategies that are developed, as well as on the discourse, the outcomes and the beneficiaries, particularly when one assumes

that the employers' and employees' interests are unified (McGuire, Cross, & O'Donnell, 2005; Spencer, 2001). Even the role of adult educators is transformed when they begin to answer to a new economic master and forget to see that human resource management practices can become technologies of control (Spencer, 1998). Already, researchers are discussing how learning agendas driven by the bottom line can backfire and drive employees away from learning (Bratton, 2001). Issues of power and control are in fact what Forrester (2002) had predicted when noticing the seductiveness associated with lifelong learning policies in Britain. Forrester (2002) had also warned against not paying enough attention to the inter-relationship between employee learning, new management practices and the wider 'modernising', post-Fordist strategies being adopted in the U.K. and several other countries. Learning in the workplace could just as likely emerge as new form of oppression and control.

When Masschelein and Quaghebeur (2005) applied Foucault's concept of governmentality and his theory on knowledge and power to children's education practices, they observed how initial emancipatory models of participation with empowering and liberating objectives can quickly become a means to govern the way people act and behave, "encouraging them to think of themselves in a very specific way" (page 1). This theory can easily be transferred to adult learning models. Filion and Rudolph (1999) observed a concrete example of this phenomenon through a case study of a bank. In their research, they reported how an organizational push towards learning resulted in cognitive homogeneity which in turn generated an increase of control and power from management. It is thus possible to see how the means by which participation in workplace learning is being discussed, promoted, provided or

utilized can have a direct impact on participation itself, particularly with adults who are in a position to interpret and respond to the invitation to learn according to their own beliefs.

It is therefore time for research in workplace learning participation to take into account the relationships in play. It is time to shift the focus away from numbers and towards processes, particularly when it comes to the less powerful in the workplace. The employees' perceptions of how the dominant versions of social reality are actually playing out in their experience and practices at work may in fact be very different (D. W. Livingstone, 2001b). Further investigations on *how* the employers' and employees' learning needs are identified, expressed, and acted upon in the workplace, particularly in light of the potential tension created between humanistic and economic goals, would be greatly beneficial to all parties involved in the planning, funding, delivery of, and participation in employee learning.

## 1.3 Knowledge Gaps

This section provides a more focused description of the workplace learning realities in an effort to articulate and situate key knowledge gaps within the broad context discussed thus far. To do so, it presents further data on participation rates, particularly among low-skilled workers, and highlights unverified assumptions often made in the available data. It then introduces the expression of demand for learning as a concept and begins to identify additional gaps in learning participation research. Finally, this section concludes by synthesizing the key elements of the overall research problem to be addressed by this study.

### *1.3.1 Sponsoring behaviours of employers and participation of employees*

As our understanding of the complexity behind learning behaviours evolves, some of the assumptions made about the participation of low-skilled workers in employer-sponsored learning activities need to be verified. For example, the link between participation and sponsoring behaviours may need to be examined more closely.

Some surveys tend to attribute the non-participation in employer-sponsored activities of low-skilled workers to the sponsoring patterns of employers (Peters, 2004; Sugrue & Kim, 2004). This suggests that it is not the profile of the individual per se that predicts participation but rather the sponsoring behaviour of the employer. In other words, employers tend to sponsor learning activities for employees who have a certain profile. Based on studies on the predictors of participation this profile has been consistently identified as: being female, younger than 54 (being younger than 25 is even more favourable), having a higher level of initial education, being in an intellectual profession (sciences and social sciences), being a supervisor, working for a large, multi-site organization, not being part of a union, and working in education, finance, health and public administration or transportation (Doray, Bélanger, Motte, & Labonté, 2004).

Most low-skilled workers do not meet the criteria just described. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that the rate of participation in formal, vocational learning activities among low-skilled workers has been consistently low (McMullan, 2004). However, as pointed out in the Net Future Institute (NFI) informal

survey of executives around the globe (Whitney, 2007), what is not clear is whether the employer's offer is being maximized at all times and whether the employees' participation profile is an exact match of the employer's sponsoring profile.

In the discussions on employees who do not participate there is also the unverified assumption that learning is something that every employee would do if it were not for the barriers, i.e. lack of employer sponsoring, that stand in their way. It is treated as though learning was something everyone valued equally.

Recent interest in the steps and behaviours involved in the process preceding participation reveal that there is in fact much more that meets the eye. Participation in employer-sponsored learning is the result of complex interactions that have taken place prior to engaging in the activities (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2006). This suggests that it is likely too simplistic to conclude from the participation and sponsoring statistics that employers are not offering opportunities to low-skilled workers or that all low-skilled workers are equally interested in employer-sponsored learning, particularly when there is evidence to the contrary in both cases (Giguere, 2006; D. W. Livingstone, 2001a). There is perhaps a missing piece in our understanding of the process that precedes participation and the interactions between the employer and the employees.

### *1.3.2 The antecedents to participation in employer-sponsored learning*

What the previous section highlights is how the antecedents to participation in employer-sponsored learning activities may play a key role in affecting the actual rates of participation. Although clear, significant correlations can be made between the

individual profile of low-skilled workers, the sponsoring patterns of employers and the participation rates of employees, those correlations are not easily explained. This is particularly true when participation or sponsoring behaviours contradict and challenge our assumptions. For example, when some employer-sponsored learning activities are not limited or targeted to a specific group of employees, it is not easy to explain who participates, why the offer is not maximized, and why it is utilized by some who do not fit the participating profile. Yet, such is the case in some organizations (Giguere, 2006).

This knowledge gap has turned some researchers towards the exploration of the antecedents of participation. If participation is framed as the outcome of a process, then it is legitimate to investigate what the process was. According to the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation in Québec (2006), the process of expressing demand for learning, whether on the employee or the employer's side, can be defined as:

> …une démarche au cours de laquelle une personne, un collectif, ou une organisation examine sa situation, se fixe un objectif, prend conscience d'une lacune que la formation peut combler, précise et formule une demande de formation en vue d'atteindre l'objectif visé (p.17).

In other words, expressing demand for learning involves a process by which an individual, a group or an organization examines their situation, sets an objective, becomes aware of gaps which can be addressed through learning, specifies and articulates a demand for learning in order to meet the desired objective. Although this concept appears somewhat simple, it not as simple to identify how it actually plays out between employees and employers. Participation statistics do not tell us who examined the situation, who set the objectives, or how the two parties became aware

of skill gaps. There are no known studies at this point that have examined these questions closely.

### *1.3.3 Gaps in research: the employer's offer, the employee and learning*

According to the researcher's literature review, an important gap in learning participation research appears to be the absence of qualitative studies where the employer's learning offer is more closely examined and where the relationship between the employer, the employee and learning is explored. Although authors who have studied trends in adult, continuing and community education research over the past 20 years have noticed a strong shift from quantitative methodologies to qualitative and combined methodologies (Imel, Kerka, & Wonacott, 2002), data available on participation in employer-sponsored learning activities and on the actual sponsoring patterns mainly come from industry reports, which rely on empirical data conducted through industry surveys. Examples include the American Society of Training and Development reports (Marquardt, King, & Ershkine, 2002; Sugrue & Kim, 2004) or the Training Magazine (Galvin, 2003). On the other hand, the large scale, traditional Adult Education surveys regularly conducted in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom further contribute to this gap by also relying mainly on quantitative methodologies.

These traditional approaches have not allowed for an in-depth analysis of the low rates of participation among low-skilled workers. Based on the literature available, it is difficult to determine if the participation trends of low-skilled workers are truly a reflection of where the support is going or if the support is going to those

who decide to participate. In other words the available research findings do not tell us which came first: the participation or the support.

When scratching beyond the surface of these questions, what is uncovered is how, despite extensive research and survey data, there are still some significant gaps in what is known about what influences the employees' participation in the learning activities offered or sponsored by their employer, their perception toward their employer vis-à-vis learning, and toward learning offered by their employer, particularly when it comes to specific sectors, such as post-secondary education. At first glance, it appears as though there may be a misalignment between the employer's offer and the employees' uptake rather than what can sometimes pass as disinterest or unwillingness to engage in learning, on either side.

The current state of employee participation in employer-sponsored learning activities is another example of missing information in the field. The data does provide rates of participation and rates of support (Marquardt et al., 2002; Peters, 2004), but the surveys are not necessarily designed to give information on the process by which employees access those activities, and the process by which employers offer support. Moreover, since the organization's internal incentives and obstacles and their interaction with the individuals' motivations and deterrents are also poorly studied, it cannot be concluded that low participation in the employer-sponsored learning activities necessarily means disengagement in learning altogether. For example, the DIFES1 provided evidence in that regard by identifying how the status of employees had an impact on their access to information, which in turn had an impact on their access to learning opportunities (Sigot & Vero, 2009). According to the New

Approaches for Lifelong Learning (NALL) survey, it is in fact rare to meet employees who are not interested in learning "something" (D. W. Livingstone, 2001a). Most employers also wish for their employees to learn. If the employer's offer is not maximized, then the problem lays somewhere else and employers who intend to support the learning of their employees ought to know where.

#### *1.3.4 Employee learning within the Ontario college context*

When it comes to employee learning, the Ontario community college sector does not escape the unanswered questions and ongoing challenges painted in the previous sections. The college system in fact faces several challenges in regards to ensuring the appropriate and necessary development of its workforce.

Although there is an absence of empirical studies on the matter, the researcher has been directly involved in the management of human resources development in an Ontario community college, as well as implicated in leading discussions with the provincial and national associations of her professional peer groups. As such, she has first-hand knowledge of the difficulties experienced in that milieu.

Despite studies that point to the contrary (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004), on the 'ground' it appears as though being in a publicly funded educational institution in Ontario makes the provision of learning opportunities vulnerable and at times seemingly frivolous relative to other very basic, essential needs such as space, faculty and technical equipment. Funding levels for Ontario colleges have been on the decline for the past 15 years and in 2006, Ontario ranked last in Canada in a provincial

comparison of revenue per student (Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario, 2006).

Moreover, the wide-ranging, diverse workforce present within each employee group (professors, administrators and support staff) and the lack of standardized skill sets or credential requirements make the management and support of learning somewhat ad hoc (College Committee on Human Resources Development, 2006).

But, in the increasingly competitive postsecondary sector, the sustained success of most large, urban community colleges in Ontario leads one to believe that their workforce, which is for the most part stable and older (Human Resources College Committee, 2004), has been adapting and evolving, or in other words, learning continuously, somehow. After forty years, most colleges in Ontario and in Canada are at a turning point: a large portion of their workforce will gradually retire and the postsecondary sector will continue to be increasingly competitive. As with many other industries and sectors, flexibility, responsiveness and innovation will be key to continued success and that of course means, having the ability to learn (Rae, 2005).

Support staff employees are particularly vulnerable in the college sector. In addition to matching the typical low-skilled worker profile and exhibiting many of the non-participation predictors, scarce resources mean that priority will be given to areas where development is crucial and deemed essential for compliance or for direct impact on the students (College Committee on Human Resources Development, 2006). Support staff schedules also do not have the flexibility of other employee groups in the college and minimalist staffing approaches to many departments also implies the

inability to be freed of duties for development opportunities (Seneca College registrar's office staff focus group, 2006).

The post-secondary sector in Ontario, the community college sector in particular, is experiencing the same workplace and workforce trends as most organizations in Canada: an aging workforce working in a continuously changing, increasingly competitive environment with an increasing need for new knowledge and skills and operating within ongoing financial constraints (Leckie, Leonard, Turcotte, & Wallace, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2003). The overall organizational profile of Ontario colleges, combined with the researcher's access to those institutions, provide an excellent opportunity for a close examination of employee participation in learning activities and for potentially closing some of the knowledge gaps identified in the previous section and common to many Canadian workplaces.

#### *1.3.5 Research Problem: The expression of demand for learning among support staff*

It was already established that there is an interest in increasing and widening the participation of employees in learning for the sake of economic prosperity, at an individual, organizational and a national level. Yet, Canada faces stagnant rates of participation, according to available data. There is extensive knowledge in the field of participation in employee learning and the profiles of participants or non-participants have been well documented. However, we have unverified assumptions about the link between employee participation and employer sponsoring behaviours, or in other words, about non-participants not having sponsorship available to them. This research gap in the antecedents to participation in learning has resulted in the need to define

and view employee participation as the outcome of a process (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2006). This process represents a series of complex interactions between the employee, the union (where applicable), the supervisor and the organization. It is within these interactions that issues such as relationships and power are emerging as new potential barriers to participation. As a result, the process that precedes employee participation in employer-sponsored learning, particularly in the vulnerable context of support staff employees in the postsecondary sector, needs to be examined. Thus, the research problem can be stated as:

"Despite the availability of research on the rates and predictors of employee participation in learning, there are knowledge gaps in our understanding of the stagnant rates of participation among workers. It is believed that participation and non-participation may be further explained by examining the antecedents to participation, including the process by which the demand for learning is expressed."

## 1.4 Research questions

Based on the knowledge gaps and the research problem introduced in the previous sections, it would appear useful to examine, in a detailed and focused manner, the antecedents to participation. This includes the study of all the parties involved in the activities that precede participation in learning: employees, supervisors, unions and the organization. Moreover, in light of the specific challenges currently experienced in the public, post-secondary sector when it comes to the development of support staff employees, the study will seek to answer the following main research question:

What are the antecedents to participation in employer-sponsored learning activities among college support staff?

The definition of the concept describing the expression of demand for learning (p. 18) suggests that the antecedents to participation consist of a multi-faceted process involving at least two parties and to which there is an outcome. Taking this complexity into consideration, the study will be designed to explore the multiple dimensions embedded in this concept: 1) the process as it occurs, 2) the roles played by the parties involved and 3) the conditions that surround the process. To further contextualize and frame the main question, the study will include questions that 4) identify gaps between the current and expected state of the process for expressing demand for learning as well as a question that will describe 5) the current state of learning at the research site. In summary, the sub-questions have been organized around those five categories:

1. The process of expressing demand for learning
    - How is the learning demand expressed by support staff?
    - How is the learning demand expressed by supervisors?
    - How is the learning demand expressed by the college?
    - How is the learning demand expressed by the support staff union?
2. Roles played by each party
    - What role do support staff play in expressing their learning demand?
    - What role does the employer play in expressing demand for learning?

  - What role does the supervisor play in the process of expressing demand for learning, for his or her support staff?
  - What role does the union play in the process of expressing demand for learning, for their members?

3. Conditions surrounding the expression of demand

  - What are the conditions that facilitate the expression of demand for learning?
  - What are the conditions that inhibit the expression of demand for learning?

4. Gaps between current and desired state for the process of expressing demand for learning

  - How do support staff expect the learning demand to be expressed?
  - How do supervisors expect the learning demand to be expressed?
  - How does the college expect the learning demand to be expressed?
  - How does the union expect the learning demand to be expressed?
  - What is the context of the study at the research site?
  - What is the overall state of participation in employer-sponsored learning activities among college support staff?

The primary question along with the sub-questions articulated above are aligned with and reflect the key dimensions ascribed to the process of expressing demand for learning as defined by the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation in Québec

(2006). This structure will therefore provide an appropriate based of the complete design of the study, including the methodology and the research instruments.

### 1.5 Implication and relevance of research: toward employer, government and provider strategies

The workforce challenges experienced by Ontario colleges are common. Consequently, the implications of this research will be relevant to several stakeholders. Many government ministries, employers and providers are anxious to explore, identify and adopt strategies that will lead to a more learning-ready, and consequently more competitive workforce. The strategies currently discussed in the literature vary considerably, from government intervention and training taxes (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2002), all the way to holistic methods that seek to build an inclusive, mutually beneficial culture of learning in the organization (Ridoutt, Dutneall, Humell, & Smith, 2002). However, without knowing more about the antecedents to participation, and more specifically, about the interactions between employers, unions and employees during the process of expressing demand for learning, it is difficult to determine the value and effectiveness of any of these strategies. The nature of that interaction likely plays a large part in determining whether participation will result. Consequently, as much as employers, providers and governments are eager for solutions, as evidenced by the increased levels of activities and funding in the area of lifelong learning, jumping to strategies could be premature and potentially wasteful.

By examining current processes and by identifying what happens before participation occurs, how, where, when, and why, it will be possible to establish

which, if any, employer interventions, initiatives and approaches would be most effective when it comes to supporting the learning practices of their employees. This additional data and knowledge could ultimately better inform governments and learning providers as to whether they should invest in strategies designed to increase and widen learning participation, and if so, then guide them towards the most appropriate policies, practices and programs.

## 1.6 Terminology

The terminology used in the study of adult, employee or lifelong learning can be quite ambiguous at times. In the literature, words such as “adult education” and “lifelong learning” are used interchangeably to refer to the same concept. In other cases, the same word is used but with a different intended meaning. This is often the case with “learning” or “participation”. This section will define the key terms studied and discussed as the primary focus of the research by providing rationale and explanations for the chosen definitions.

### *1.6.1 Antecedents to Participation in Learning*

In this study the term antecedents to participation is intended to include all the factors, conditions, or processes that may influence, shape or determine whether an adult will participate in a learning activity. Over the years the number of recognized variables and dimensions considered important antecedents to participation has expanded to reflect the complexity of the learner’s profile, situation, institution and disposition (Manninen, 2004). The process by which the learning demand is identified, expressed and acted upon is also considered a significant antecedent to participation

(Bélanger & Federighi, 2000). The antecedents reviewed in this study will therefore include the reasons and barriers for providing or participating in learning activities, the predictors of participation based on the profile of individuals or organizations, and the process of expressing demand for learning.

### *1.6.2 Lifelong Learning*

"Lifelong Learning" is used in this study in a way that reflects the historical evolution of the concept. It began to appear in the early twentieth century under the term "Lifelong Education" (Jarvis, 1995). In their early uses, the two terms were used interchangeably and referred to the same concept. It is only in the 1990s that a conscious and intentional distinction was made between education and learning in order to indicate a shift in responsibility, from the provider to the learner (Tuijnman & Bostram, 2002).

But between its first appearance and its re-emergence at the beginning and end of the twentieth century respectively, Lifelong Learning took several turns and detours. In fact, it was the concept of Adult Education that dominated most decades.

By the early 1990s, new, significant economic trends described in the earlier sections were paving the way for another paradigm shift in education and training. At the end of the twentieth century, this shift was global enough to generate international consensus about formally establishing Lifelong Learning as the new framework for discussion (Field, 2000). The Delors Report *Learning: The Treasure Within* (1996) produced for UNESCO, became to Lifelong Learning what the Faure report (1972) was to Lifelong Education. The change in semantics was not explicitly purposeful in

Delors' work but it did reflect the times. More than 20 years since Faure's *Learning to Be*, the field of Lifelong Education had evolved enough to recognize the life-wide aspect of Education and the benefits of non-vocational, personal growth. Moreover where "Education" focused on the responsibilities, needs and decisions of the system and the institutions, "Learning" shifted the focus onto the responsibility, needs, and decisions of the individual. In the end, Lifelong Learning, as used and referred to in this research, is essentially meant to imply or evoke a humanistic and individualistic approach, inclusive of all forms of learning and all age groups.

### *1.6.3 Employer-Sponsored Learning Activities*

The term "employer-sponsored learning activities" is used to refer to education, training, and learning, and is intended to include all forms of learning, such as formal, non-formal, informal, personal interest and work-related activities that are in some way supported by the employer. In the literature, learning typologies tend to revolve around two aspects: the purpose and the primary learning agent (Fitzgerald et al., 2003; D.W. Livingstone, 2001).

For the purpose of this research, "employer-sponsored" will be the expression used to describe any employee learning activity in which the employer had a role to play. The employer's sponsoring role could be in any form, such as but not limited to, providing space, time, funding, information, support, facilitators, equipment or materials. This is in line with the approach taken in the Canadian Adult Education and Training Survey (Peters, 2004). The learning activity typology used for this research is further described below.

#### 1.6.3.1 Learning Purpose

The purpose most often separates work-related and non-work-related learning (Fitzgerald et al., 2003; Peters, 2004). In this research, the terms "vocational" and "non-vocational", as used in the British survey (Fitzgerald et al., 2003), have been chosen for clarity and simplicity. Vocational is intended to include what other authors may call training, work-related learning, job-related, future work, or vocational education. In fact, in this study, training will always refer to vocational learning, whether formal, non-formal or informal. Non-vocational learning captures all learning that is not related to work, current or future (Table 1, p.32).

#### 1.6.3.2 Learning Method

Aside from the purpose, it is important to differentiate the form or method of learning. Typically, the literature distinguishes between formal, non-formal, and informal learning as the three principal methods of learning (Directorate for Education, 2002). Although Livingstone (2001) suggests the difference between the methods of learning is a reflection of the primary "learning agent", this concept will not be used here. As the next section will reveal, it is becoming difficult to identify the agent at times, even in self-directed learning.

Formal learning refers to activities that are taught and evaluated. Formal learning will therefore include all references to "education" since education will be associated with learning that is instructor-led and / or structured with formal recognition or credits from a state or industry / sector accredited institution. Non-formal learning in contrast is defined in this context as being taught but not evaluated.

Examples of such learning activities may include workshops and seminars. Informal learning then, refers to learning that is not taught, nor evaluated formally. However, it is only meant to include intentional learning (D.W. Livingstone, 2001). It therefore excludes tacit forms of learning and daily activities adults normally go through. Informal learning will encompass terms such as self-directed, self-taught, or on-the-job learning (Table 1, p.32).

*Table 1. Learning activity typology used for the purpose of this study*

| **Learning activity** | ***Description*** |
|---|---|
| Purpose | *Based on Fitzgerald et al. (2003)* |
| Vocational | *Job or work-related, present or future* |
| Non-Vocational | *Not related to work, present or future* |
| Primary learning method | *Based on OECD's Directorate for Education (2002) and Livingstone (2001)* |
| Formal | *Instructor-led and / or structured with formal recognition or credit* |
| Informal | *Self-directed and without formal evaluation, credit or recognition; Intentional* |
| Non-Formal | *Instructor-led and / or structured sessions or programme without formal evaluation, credit or recognition.* |
| Sponsor | *Based on Peters (2004)* |
| *Employer-sponsored* | *Support provided by the employer in some way, e.g. time, facilities, funding, instructor, guidance or materials* |

This typology for describing employer-sponsored learning activities represents by no means a definitive, ideal or standard approach. It has been created and adopted

in this study in order to provide a framework for a clearer and more consistent discussion as well as a structure for comparison, analysis and synthesis of the literature reviewed in the next chapter.

### *1.6.4 Participation*

When it comes to employer-sponsored learning activities, participation can take many shapes or forms and thus be defined in several ways. The spectrum of participation definitions has in fact expanded over the last few years. Evolving from a simplistic voluntary versus mandatory paradigm, researchers have more recently begun to unpack the complexity of participation by debunking the assumption that all adults would voluntary participate in learning if it were not for barriers standing in their way (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004). Stalker (1993), in fact added a new dimension to voluntary participation by suggesting a different model for participation: other-determined and self-determined. This was meant to clarify that voluntary participation may not reflect instances when the employee "volunteers" to participate into a learning activity determined by the employer.

This study will take these nuances into consideration and will define participation as including all types: self-initiated, suggested, voluntary but strongly encouraged, and mandatory. In fact, because the research concentrates on the processes preceding participation, the type of participation will become in and of itself an important element in the data collection.

### *1.6.5 College Support Staff*

The support staff at the research site is the population studied for the purpose of this research. In the context of an academic institution, there are typically three employee groups: support staff, faculty and administrative staff. The support staff jobs are the most diverse and range from low-skilled clerical roles to professional or technical positions in information technology.

## 1.7 Limitations of the study

This study has limitations that are conceptual, methodological and situational. The conceptual limitations are related to the fact that processes and learning are two immaterial, intangible and complex concepts. As presented in the earlier section on terminology, researching and discussing participation in learning requires respondents to speak about their learning events through artificial and arbitrary categories, categories which are defined differently in the literature and in various surveys (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2002). It also requires them to speak about their intents and motives in simplistic terms, and in a way that would assume a high level of cognitive awareness. This aspect of adult learning research has long been documented as a key weakness, most difficult to address (Rubenson, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Moreover, the inclusion of informal learning in participation research relies heavily on self-identification of learning events, something that has proven difficult since most adults do not tend to acknowledge, remember or recognize their own learning events, without probing (D.W. Livingstone, 2001; Tough, 1978, 1999).

The methodological limitation comes from the inherent validity and applicability threats posed by the qualitative research and the case study method. In this particular study, the sampling method and the use of questionnaires and interviews means that issues of generalization and evaluative validity will be of most concern. These issues are further described in Chapter 4. In regards to application, although it is anticipated that the findings will be applicable to most large, multi-site, public sector, unionized organizations, it is important to realize that the culture, history and some of the policies of the organization where the study will take place are unique and specific. The approaches and processes vary widely from organization to organization, within and outside provincial and national jurisdictions. It is therefore understood that the findings will be in some way limited to the case at hand.

The situational limitations are related to the researcher's role in the management of workplace learning in a large, urban community college in Ontario. Although the study will take place at a college other than where the researcher worked, she is familiar with the system, some of the policies and with some of the individuals who will be interviewed. Moreover, the researcher is a known advocate for the increase and widening of employee participation in learning, particularly in the college sector, at the local, provincial and national levels. Her potential bias may further pose a threat to the subjectivity and hence the validity of the findings. This issue will be considered in the methodology and additional validation methods will be employed where possible and necessary.

## 1.8 Summary

In summary, this chapter has identified how, despite increased attention, efforts, focus and funding towards employee learning, barriers appear to continue to stand in the way of workplace learning. Although the data often points towards employers not sponsoring some employees or towards the typical non-participant profile of some workers, when focusing on the processes and the interactions between the various parties involved prior to the actual participation, questions begin to emerge.

There is therefore a need to investigate the antecedents to participation in learning, including the process of expressing demand for learning. Rather than focusing on participation data, and then through the data attempting to explain what took place prior to participation and what were the conditions that led to participation, this study will research the antecedents to participation among support staff in the context of an Ontario community college. If participation in, and provision of, learning in the workplace is the result of a multi-party, multi-step process, then questions such as who is responsible for initiating the process, what are the steps, who is involved, and how, need to be investigated.

This chapter highlighted and grounded those questions in the current theories and in the current realities of the workplace in Canada and more specifically in the Ontario postsecondary education sector. It presented the research problem, the research questions, the relevance of the research, as well as its limitations. Details on the theoretical framework and the methodology will be presented in the next chapters.

# CHAPTER 2

# LITERATURE REVIEW

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will provide a review of the literature on the key topics being examined in this study. To reflect the main concepts introduced in Chapter 1, this chapter is divided into two main sections: Canadian and international participation trends and the antecedents to participation in learning activities. A third section is included to provide further literature on the context of support employees and Ontario colleges.

In the first section, there is a thorough synthesis of the employee participation and employer sponsoring trends reported in a number of Canadian and international surveys. It is followed by the examination of the antecedents to participation. This includes a review of the profile predictors for each of the party involved in the process, as a well as an examination of the process itself. Then, based on the model below (Figure 1, p.39) and on how inhibiting factors or incentives can affect the process at any point, a review of the various barriers and reasons for participation identified in the literature is provided.

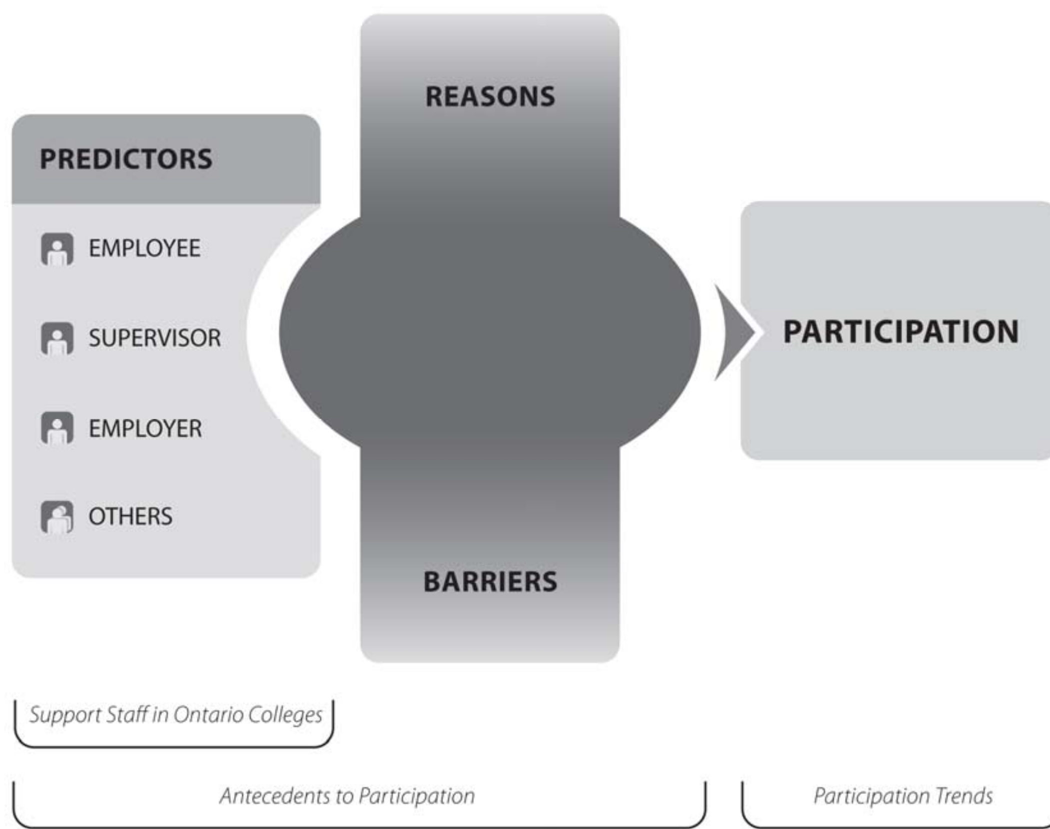


*Figure 1. Framework for the organization of the literature review*

### 2.1 Recent trends in overall adult participation in learning activities

In the past decade, several studies have captured the recent trends in the overall participation of adults in learning activities. According to the research, employees and employers alike are increasingly aware of the need to learn and many are turning to their employers to provide learning opportunities. In 2008, in response to the Canadian Council of Learning (CCL) survey of Canadian attitudes toward learning, 58.8% of respondents deemed adult learning critical to success in life and to satisfaction with life (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009a). Perhaps in light of this recognition, the overall participation in vocational learning activities increased from 29% in 1997 to 35 % in

2002 (Peters, 2004). In 2008, the CCL was reporting 51% of Canadians having participated in formal, vocational learning (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009a). When removing approximately 25% of the respondents for whom this meant continued formal education through full-time enrolment at a college or university (a category not included in the 2002 HRSDC survey), there is an estimated increase to 38%. Meanwhile, the rate of participation in employer-sponsored learning increased only slightly to 25% in 2002 from 22% in 1997 (McMullan, 2004). Despite these relatively small increases, and some noticeable changes in the participation behaviour of older, educated workers, the overall participation patterns of adults and employees have remained fairly constant, in Canada and abroad, over the last thirty years. These findings are mirrored in the results of surveys examining the sponsoring practices of employers (Sugrue & Kim, 2004).

The next section provides a review of major employee and employer survey data and establishes the key participation and sponsoring trends in Canada and abroad.

### *2.1.1 Description of the learning surveys reviewed*

The Canadian and international surveys selected and reviewed in this section tend to be broad and from one perspective. Yet they are synthesized here because they are for the most part large-scale, well-established, validated instruments and because there is very little data specific to employee participation in employer-sponsored activities. The most common surveys in the field of adult learning are generally from the employees' perspective and include, but are not limited to employer-sponsored learning. Employer surveys are on the other hand, generally speaking, from the employers' perspective only. These one-way reports are somewhat limiting in the context of the subject at hand but the

results and outcomes of these studies do shed light on the overall context and background being examined in this study. A brief description of these surveys follows.

2.1.1.1 Employee-based data on participation in learning

In order to review the main trends in employee participation in learning, five major national surveys from Canada (3), the United Kingdom and the United States were selected. These surveys obtain data from individual citizens and not from employers. The employer data found in these surveys is based on the participants' (the employees) responses. As for their content, the United Kingdom's *National Adult Learning Survey* (NALS) is inclusive of all learning described in Table 1 (p. 32) (Fitzgerald et al., 2003; Snape, Tanner, & Sinclair, 2006). This survey's data is somewhat skewed based on the fact that it asks respondents to comment about their learning over the last three years. The other four surveys tend to refer to the last twelve months but exclude one form of learning or another. The nomenclature varies as well. For the sake of this analysis and comparison, the various types of learning will be categorized and referred to as per the definitions provided in Table 1 (p.32).

The American survey, titled *Participation in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning Survey,* excluded non-vocational, informal learning in 2003 (Kim et al., 2004), but included it in 2005 (O'Donnell, 2006). This survey has not explored vocational, non-formal learning to date. Meanwhile, the Canadian study, titled *Adult Education and Training Survey* (AETS), excluded all non-vocational learning for the first time in its history (Peters, 2004). The Canadian Council on Learning, which appears to have taken over the responsibility of surveying learning trends in Canada continued with the same

approach in 2008 (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009a) and focused mainly on vocational learning. *The Work and Lifelong Learning in Canada* (from here on referred to as the WALL survey) excluded all formal learning (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006). Notwithstanding the Canadian WALL survey, which is unique and most recent in its kind, the inclusions and exclusions have evolved over the years and appear to show various shifts in focus in each jurisdiction. It is in fact interesting to observe how the Canadian, American and British surveys, which were all much more similar at one time, have diverged over the years, likely as a reflection of the political and lifelong learning landscape in each country (Human Resources Development and Statistics Canada, 1997, 2001; Kim & Creighton, 2000; LaValle & Blake, 2001).

Other details worthy of notice are either new or different ways of identifying various forms of learning. Of particular interest is how the U.K. innovated by adding a new category called “Family Learning” to the traditional vocational and non-vocational groups, to capture activities that did not easily fit in either. This category looks at activities parents do with their child so they can help them learn new things or develop new skills as well as at what the parents learn at the same time (Fitzgerald et al., 2003). This is becoming akin to the WALL survey, which has begun to map out unpaid work, such as household work and parenting. In a similar vain, the CCL decide to examine, in distinctive section, attitudes of Canadian toward health and learning (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009a). This now shows a new expanded interest in non-vocational learning in Canada, albeit focused only on health at this point in time.

2.1.1.2 Employer-based data on sponsoring practices for learning activities

In order to capture employer sponsoring practices for learning activities, we will continue to draw on the surveys discussed so far: the most recent Canadian *Adult Education and Training Survey* (AETS), and the American *National Household Education Survey* on participation in adult education and lifelong learning, (NHES), with the addition of the American Society for Training and Development's *State of the Industry* (ASTD) review on trends in workplace learning and performance, and the Training Magazine's *2007 Industry Report* (TMIR). As mentioned earlier, the AETS and NHES questionnaires survey individual employees and citizens, whereas the ASTD and the TMIR are both American surveys directed at employers. Canadian and other international data are drawn from the American Society for Training and Development's 2002 *International Comparisons.* Although these documents provide the core of the data, other reports are referred to as needed, when confirming trends and providing additional insight or support for current figures.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics in the U.S. surveyed both the employer and the employees as part of one overall study in 1995 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1996a, 1996b; Frazis, Gittleman, Horrigan, & Joyce, 1998). However, despite reporting different findings from the employee survey and the employer survey, there does not appear to be any attempts at analyzing such differences. For example, employers reported providing 11 hours of formal learning per year, per employee whereas employees reported spending 13 hours on formal learning per year (Frazis et al., 1998). There is also no comment on the fact that 93% of employers reported providing formal training while 70% of employees in those organizations reported receiving training (Frazis et al., 1998). A

discussion on who is providing the additional two hours of formal learning or an analysis on the 30% of employees who do not receive training could have been quite beneficial to surfacing trends and gaps in perceptions, processes, and between the offer and the uptake. Yet again, this traditional approach indicates how the employers' data tend to be taken – or perhaps *mis*taken - as employee participation patterns and the employee data taken as employer sponsoring trends. The analysis that follows will further elaborate on the impact of this practice.

### *2.1.2 Adult participation in learning activities: Canadian and international trends*

Once the types of learning included in the data are taken into consideration and broken apart, the adults' participation trends observed through the surveys are somewhat similar in the United States and the United Kingdom. Yet it is important to keep in mind that due to the variance in survey objectives and design, a true comparison is not possible (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2002). This is most notable when comparing the results of the AETS and the CCL and the results for informal vocational learning: 33% for 25 to 65 year-olds as opposed to 88% for 18 to 74 year-olds respectively. The loose comparative analysis of the various surveys is used to draw attention to the important role played by informal learning, particularly non-vocational, informal learning. In Canada, participation in learning activities jumps from 38% for vocational, formal learning, to 91% when all non-vocational, informal learning is included. In the U.S., the overall rate of participation in vocational learning is reported as 27% under formal learning, but as 63% when considering informal approaches (Table 2, p.45). Although these jumps actually include overlap, the higher number still clearly

shows that informal learning is not to be neglected when conducting studies on adult learning.

*Table 2. Participation rates by type of learning activity and by country.*

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>Canada<br>AETS 2003<br>(McMullan, 2004)<br>CCL 2008<br>(Canadian Council on Learning, 2009a)</th><th colspan="2">Canada<br>WALL 2004<br>(Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006)</th><th colspan="3">U.K.<br>NALS<br>(Snape et al., 2006)<br>3-year record</th><th colspan="2">U.S.<br>NHES 2003<br>(O'Donnell, 2006)</th></tr>
<tr><td>Formal Vocational</td><td>38%</td><td colspan="2"></td><td rowspan="2">62%</td><td rowspan="4">67% Voc. F&I<br><br>25% N-V F&I</td><td rowspan="4">80%</td><td>27%</td><td rowspan="2">44%</td></tr>
<tr><td>Formal Non-Vocational</td><td></td><td colspan="2"></td><td>21%</td></tr>
<tr><td>Informal Vocational</td><td>88% (CCL 18-74 years old)<br><br>33% (AETS 25-64 years old)</td><td>85%</td><td rowspan="2">91%</td><td rowspan="2">65%</td><td colspan="2">63% (Kim et al., 2004)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Informal Non-Vocational</td><td></td><td></td><td colspan="2">70%</td></tr>
</table>

[shaded box] Indicates type of learning not addressed in survey.
Note: Individual percentages for specific types of learning activity do not equal the sum of one category due to learners reporting more than one type of learning activity.

Upon analyzing the participation trends, several studies have begun to draw links between the profile of learners and the nature of their learning activities. For example, generally speaking, the profile of learning participants shows an individual who is

younger, and / or with a higher level of educational attainment, and / or in a professional or managerial occupation. Non-participants tend to be older, lower-skilled, and / or low income, living in deprived areas (Fitzgerald et al., 2003; Snape et al., 2006). Although with increasing demands from government, employers and regulatory bodies, an increase in formal participation from the older (50+ years of age) professionals / managerial group has been observed (McMullan, 2004). These trends are not new. However, the additional insight that has been gained, based on the inclusion of vocational and non-vocational informal learning, is a potential link between the profile and the type of learning activity preferred by individuals.

According to the WALL survey, 91% of the Canadian population is involved in informal learning, whether vocational or not (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006). According to the AETS, 38% of employed Canadian reported formal vocational learning, and 33% reported informal vocational, with 87% of these adult using both methods. In other words, 87% of Canadian who took formal learning, also took vocational, informal learning (McMullan, 2004).

The results for informal, vocational learning are quite different in the AETS (33%) and the WALL survey (85%). According to Livingstone and Scholtz (2006) this is due to differences in methodologies. WALL reports having a much broader definition and list of categories for informal, vocational learning than the AETS. WALL also notes the sequence in which questions were asked as having a potential impact. The AETS focused on vocational learning, and then asked which portion was informal. The WALL survey asked about all informal learning and then asked which portion was job-related (vocational). This variance in method may have skewed the results to a large extent

particularly when collecting data on informal learning is an imprecise science. It largely relies on self-identification, self-reporting and self-estimates of time, topic and purpose and are therefore merely rough approximation (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006). This further reinforces the extent to which the design of the survey must be taken into consideration in the analysis of the data.

One unknown figure that no one is reporting relates to the percentage of the Canadian, employed population over 25 years of age participating *only* in non-vocational informal learning. This is likely the same group which appears to be non-participating according to the AETS but who is perhaps disengaged with vocational learning only. They are perhaps those reporting no unmet, vocational learning needs: 50% of workers according to the AETS, which tends to be composed of the low-skilled, less educated, or older workers. The WALL survey also recorded that participation in courses (formal learning) drops off rapidly with age, likely because the older individuals get, the more they rely on themselves for further learning (Livingstone, 1999b).

If the low-skilled, less educated and / or older workers prefer informal learning, and they are obviously engaged in learning according to WALL, their reasons for choosing non-vocational learning are unclear. Rubenson (1999) observed that the type of learning chosen was often correlated to the expected outcome. It is therefore possible that since informal learning is not readily recognized by employers, and yet it is the type of learning that these groups are most comfortable with, they are more likely to invest their resources in personal interest learning activities, where they are more in control over the outcomes and benefits to be gained. The NHES indeed showed that a bivariate and a multivariate analysis of socio-demographic variables such as age, sex, race/ethnicity,

prior educational attainment, income, and occupational/employment status yielded a correlation between the participant profile and the type of learning activity selected (Kim et al., 2004). With a 25% rate of participation in non-vocational learning, formal and informal combined, the U.K. survey appears to support this line of thinking.

The consistency of the participation trends across time and distance continues to confirm the relevance of the socio-demographic profile of individuals when predicting participation in learning activities. Such predictors will be explored in more detail in a later section.

#### *2.1.3 Trends in employer-sponsored learning activities*

From the perspective of many employers, learning, at the individual, departmental or organization level, has become a key strategy in remaining competitive and surviving (Goldenberg, 2006). In the workplace context, effective learning is demonstrated by the ability of employees, teams and employers to adopt strategic management processes, including reviewing, evaluating and redirecting resources (Bratton, 2001). In a post-industrial era, the survival and success of the organization therefore depends highly on its willingness to embrace such an approach. Many employers are struggling with this new reality. Employees are increasing their learning but employers are not necessarily increasing their offer (Peters, 2004).

This section provides an overview of the employer's perspective on their provision of employer-sponsored learning activities by describing their profile, rate of support, type of learning activities supported, and the employees they support.

2.1.3.1 Employers' sponsoring profile

There are important limitations to take into consideration when reviewing these reports. For example, the AETS only looks at vocational learning. The NHES excludes informal non-vocational, whereas the ASTD and the TMIR exclude all informal learning as well as not-for-profit organizations. Moreover, the AETS and NHES can only tell us the percentage of individuals who availed themselves of employer support, not necessarily the extent of the employer's offer of support. Finally, the ASTD and TMIR show the nature and amounts of the employers' actual investment in learning but not the extent of the offer or the rate of employee uptake. It is therefore difficult to obtain a complete picture of employee participation in employer-sponsored learning activities but these various sets of data provide a good starting point.

2.1.3.2 Rate of employer sponsorship for learning activities

The employee-centered surveys can give us the rate of employee participation in learning activities for which they received support from their employer. According to the AETS, participation in employer-supported training has been stable at approximately 24%, with a slight national increase being driven by a significant jump since 1997 in New-Brunswick (from 19% to 26%) and in Quebec (from 15% to 24%) (Peters, 2004). In New-Brunswick this does not necessarily mean that employer support itself grew, but that there was at least a rise in uptake. In Quebec, the growth may actually reflect an increase in investment in light of the implementation in 1996 of the "Act to Foster the Development of Manpower Training", a law also known as "loi du 1%". According to this Act, employers with a payroll greater than $250,000 must invest 1% of their payroll into training or make a contribution to a training fund for employees. Although not

directly comparable to the AETS due the different methodology, the CCL survey reported that 56% of employees received some form of employer support in 2008 (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009a). The large difference is most likely due to the fact that this figure includes employer support for non-formal learning. Despite the inclusion of non-formal learning, the results still showed that those with a high school diploma or less consistently received less support.

From the employers' perspective, the rate of learning support is usually measured in total dollars invested, average dollar amount per employee or percentage of employee payroll. According to the ASTD, the American average annual expenditure per employee in the broadest sample of organizations looks as though it has increased incrementally from $820 USD in 2002 to $1,103 USD in 2007 (Paradise, 2008). However, when looking at the average percentage of payroll invested in learning, results show 2.2 percent in 2002, 2.52 in 2004, down to 2.33 in 2007 in average organizations. Meanwhile, the decrease is more significant in large Fortune 500 companies, going from 2.47 in 2002 to 1.99 in 2004 (Sugrue & Kim, 2004). In other words, the dollar amounts may look like an increase but it is more likely representative of the increase in costs. In 2000, Canada's expenditure per employee sat at about $584 USD per employee, compared to an international average of $630 USD (Marquardt et al., 2002).

Employees and employers arrived at similar figures when it comes to the percentage of employees receiving employer-support for their formal, vocational activities. In Canada, in 2002, 72% of employees who participated in vocational learning reported having received employer support, down from 79% in 1997 (McMullan, 2004),

whereas employers indicated an international rate of 76.7% in 2000 (Marquardt et al., 2002).

#### 2.1.3.3 Type of learning activities sponsored by employers

In the average U.S. organization, in 2003, 38% of the learning supported fell in one of three categories: managerial and supervisory, IT and systems, or process, procedures, and business practices. The least content was provided on basic skills, new employee orientation and executive development (Sugrue & Kim, 2004).

Canada's AETS does not appear to have investigated where the employer support went, on what type of content. However, it is interesting to note that although this survey's stated focus is on vocational learning only, one table shows 14.1% of employees reporting employers sponsoring non-vocational learning activities (Peters, 2004). This data is not discussed nor analyzed anywhere in the report. If some employers did in fact provide support for non-vocational learning activities, it would be of interest to find out what they sponsored, in what way, and why. Such data could be compared to the Scottish study on work based learning completed in 2002. In this study, the authors report that 47% of employers claim to support employees to undertake training not directly related to their job. Yet, only 4% of employees corroborated this (Glass, Higgins, & McGregor, 2002). This survey also explores the reasons employers and employees believe that providing non-vocational learning activities is necessary. Those reasons include a duty to raise the employability of their employees, a need for increased flexibility of employees to take on wider range of tasks, and a desire to improve staff morale. Of course the employer's commitment to non-vocational program such as Employee Development

Schemes (EDS) are not purely altruistic. The boost in employee confidence, morale, motivation, loyalty and respect for the employer, as well as the resulting lower turnover and absenteeism, all benefits to the employers, have been documented in the Ford case study (Beattie, 1997). In any case, employees and employers may see eye to eye on these incentives but the difference in each party's perception of the extent of the support would be worth exploring further.

According to the International Comparisons Report, Canadian respondents spent the most of their learning time and resources on technical processes and procedures (17% of total participation) and information technology skills (16% of total participation) (Marquardt et al., 2002).

The overall international trend is for employers to support vocational learning activities, both formal and informal, in areas where the pace of change is the greatest, i.e. technology-based positions and in areas which are perceived as having the most direct impact on the performance and effectiveness of the organization: management and processes / procedures. In many organizations, this can potentially leave a large portion of the employee population out of the learning equation. This appears to be most true in small to medium size enterprises where scarce training budgets are spent on critical activities deemed absolutely necessary and where failure to provide learning opportunities would pose a direct, immediate threat to the organization in the form of security threats, regulation infringements, systems failure, loss of accreditation, licences and so on. It is only in very large organizations that there appears to be a willingness to invest in more strategic opportunities such as non-vocational learning activities (Glass et al., 2002).

2.1.3.4 Recipients of employer sponsoring for learning activities

Considering where the training dollars are spent and where the development priorities appear to be, it is reasonable to expect that a large percentage of the recipients would be managers, supervisors, and IT employees. It would also be reasonable to expect a correlation between participation trends and employer-support trends. After all, it is difficult for groups of employees who do not participate to receive employer-support. The data is generally in line with such logical expectations and overall, the results of surveys from employees and employers appear to be consistent with one another and the international trends are similar.

Training and development surveys have traditionally found clear patterns in who receives employer support for their learning activities. The findings, which report that support varies by occupation, education level, and industry, appear to mirror the participation patterns observed in employee-based studies such as the AETS, the NHES and other studies. Lee, Clery, and Carroll (1999) for example reported that employer support for degree programs varied by occupation, that those in sales, marketing or administrative positions were less likely to receive support than those in technical fields, executive management, or professional positions.

The AETS somewhat reflects these findings and shows that in 2002, Canadian employees in professional and managerial occupations had the highest rate of participation in employer-supported vocational learning (35%) (Peters, 2004). However, because the study from Lee, Clery, and Carroll (1999) focused on support for postsecondary programs, the comparison stops there. White collar workers in clerical, sales and service occupations (20%), and blue collar workers (16%) were next in line

with the highest level of participation in employer-sponsored learning activities (Peters, 2004).

The above numbers are in turn aligned to the employers' view that the largest percentage of learning expenditure in 2003 was customer service employees (18% of budget), middle managers (11%) and production employees (11%), whereas an average of 10% of the budget went to executives and senior managers (Sugrue & Kim, 2004). These numbers had remained consistent by 2007 (Paradise, 2008). This appears incongruent at first but when all management-related learning is grouped together, it jumps to 28%. As a result, all available data, Canadian, American and international, whether reported by employees or employers, show the top three employee groups receiving the learning investment as being the managers, the professionals, and the production workers. The correlation with the top three areas of development discussed in the previous section also holds. It is indeed possible to infer that managers receive managerial and supervisory training, and that professionals receive the bulk of the technical, procedures, and business practices learning.

Where the research and data fall short is in an analysis of whether the participation trends reflect where the support is going or who participates. As a result, it is not possible to establish, based on data, whether participation was followed by support, or support was followed by participation. These are some of the issues that the type of surveys and reports reviewed in this section fail to explore. This also further supports the need for an investigation in the process by which learning activities are actualized.

## 2.2 Antecedents to employee participation in employer-sponsored learning activities

This sections maps and models the antecedents to employee participation in employer-sponsored learning activities based on the trends reviewed and analyzed. The antecedents reviewed here include the reasons and barriers to participating or providing learning activities, the predictors of participation based on the profile of individuals or organizations, and the process of expressing demand for learning. Other factors, such as employer-employee relationships and the relationship between knowledge and power, complete this section's discussion on the antecedents to participation in learning.

### *2.2.1 Reasons for employee participation and employer provision of learning activities*

Employees and employers have their own respective set of reasons when it comes to participating in, or providing, learning activities. The theoretical models related to employee motivation and reasons for participation are introduced first. They are followed by the trends expressed by employees and by employers in surveys.

#### 2.2.1.1 Employees' reasons for participating in learning activities according to theoretical models

The work of Houle (1961) is often cited as having built a foundation for categorizing learners and their reasons, or more specifically their motivation, for participating in learning. According to Houle, there are those who are goal oriented, seeking to fulfill conscious objectives; those who are learning oriented, seeking knowledge for its own sake; and those who are activity oriented, taking part for reasons of companionship or to fill time. Houle's simplified model generated numerous follow-up

studies and led to a psychometric tradition that continually sought to confirm, improve and / or challenge Houle's motivational framework (Boshier, 1971; Rubenson, 2001)

Despite results indicating that the typology itself and the method used to arrive at Houle's orientation trinity were in fact oversimplified, somehow there was a reluctance in the field to move away from this model (Boshier & Collins, 1985). Twenty-two years later, Boshier and Collins (1985) decided to put it to the test once more with a large set of data and concluded that the first two orientations, learning and goal, were relevant but that the third one, the activity orientation, was far more complex than Houle originally suggested. This multi-faceted learning orientation, which should include, at a minimum, components such as Social Stimulation, Social Contact, External Expectations and Community Service items (Boshier & Collins, 1985), should serve as a reminder that typologies are convenient in research but their limitations should always be taken into consideration. Still, the trend for developing and using typologies continues, likely because many feel that:

> "Typologies provide a way to group individuals according to a variety of characteristics, thus incorporating diverse information into a meaningful conceptual framework" (Hayes, 1988, p.1).

While the short-comings of the psychology-based models began to surface, interactional, psycho-sociological models that had been developed in parallel to psychological ones, but without much acceptance, gradually became more prominent in the field of Adult Education Participation. The key highlights of this evolution are presented below.

Some of the interactional models go back as far as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory which said that when basic needs are met, people were more likely to engage in

additional activities. This implied that before adults could participate in learning activities, basic needs such as food and shelter had to be satisfied (Miller, 1967, as cited in McGivney, 1990, p.26). Boshier (1971) later introduced the Congruence Model, referring to the need for a match between the perception of self and the nature of the education programme. This was later followed by the force-field theory which Rubenson (1977) further developed into his Expectancy / Valence theory. This particular model was based on an economical cost / benefit formula, wherein the decision is a result of whether the expected gain will be greater than the expanse in time, money, energy or other resources. This deterministic model was later criticized as reducing humans to ahistorical and aspiritual beings, only capable of rational decisions (Dow, 1998 and West, 1996, as cited in Rubenson, 2001, p.30).

Darkenwald and Merriam, (1986) offered Life Transition as a participatory theory, arguing that participation was determined by a continuum of responses to internal and external stimuli, such as a sudden changes in one's life.

In 1986, Cookson, (1992) introduced an adapted version of D. H. Smith's Interdisciplinary, sequential-specific time allocation life span model (ISSTAL) as a way to expand on the work of Darkenwald and Merriam described earlier. This model was an attempt to incorporate all psycho-social and situational variables, without consideration to their traditional disciplinary boundaries. It was intended to unify all the discreet components of theories from various fields looking at Adult Education Participation.

Through their case-based theory, Gilboa and Schmeidler (1992) attempted to add the previously missing historical component in Rubenson's model by showing how individuals remember past problems and use their experience to make decisions.

All these models differ in their angle, context and emphasis through which they choose to observe individual behaviour. By building on their predecessors' work, they each attempt to incorporate more, new factors, both internal (psychological) and external (sociological), as well as more interactions between the two. In the end, due to the complexity of the behaviour they are trying to explain, flaws can always be found. The key has been to use these models knowingly and with appropriate recognition of their limitations. This likely explains why to this day, many still simply go back to Cross' chain of response model. Although criticized and limited by its linearity, it somewhat captures the overall essence of many of the models developed since. As a result, it is found as a starting point in many recent studies, including this one. These participation models anchored in motivation greatly influenced, and in many cases provided the basis for, the predictor models that have since emerged. Those are discussed in a later section.

#### 2.2.1.2 Trends in the employees' reasons for participating in learning activities according to surveys

According to surveys, the employees' reasons for participating in learning activities depend largely on the type and context of learning. The reasons for formal, vocational learning activities continue to be somewhat intuitive and consistently confirmed in surveys. The same cannot be said about the motives for participating in informal learning. This section exposes the complexity of influencing factors affecting this type of learning, especially when it comes to non-vocational activities.

As the lifelong learning paradigm becomes more widely accepted and higher on government and policy priorities, a large percentage of participation is now attributed to learning activities being made mandatory by employers or regulatory bodies (Field,

1999). All reviewed surveys support this trend. The reasons most often mentioned for participating in vocational learning, regardless of formal or informal include: occupational requirement, licence requirement, pay increase / financial wealth, competencies upgrade, change in work, or requirement by employer (Fitzgerald et al., 2003; Kim et al., 2004; McMullan, 2004).

Although the overall pattern is consistent, some of those reasons seem to vary according to age, education, employment status, occupation and household income (DeBell & Mulligan, 2005). For example, older, more educated, higher income participants were more likely to identify reasons related to improving their current skills, and less likely to say that it was for getting or changing jobs. On the other hand, younger employees were more likely to indicate they were taking a course to satisfy their employer's recommendation or to get a raise / promotion than older, professional/managerial workers (DeBell & Mulligan, 2005). The most recent study in Canada also indicated that of those participating in vocational learning, twice as many reported learning to perform more effectively in their current jobs (69%) than they did to earn more money (32%) or get a better job (31%) (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006).

These above-mentioned reasons are typically associated with vocational learning while participation in non-vocational learning is often assumed to be out of 'personal interest'. Few surveys go beyond exploring the reasons behind non-vocational learning activities, taking for granted that the reason is just that: personal interest. However, when given the opportunity to comment further, it is interesting to see the wide range of reasons that can hide behind a 'personal interest'. The U.K. survey did ask such a question and found that in regards to formal or non-formal, non-vocational learning,

reasons were much more about “doing something interesting”, improving knowledge on a subject, meeting new people, having fun, filling spare time and keeping their body active (Fitzgerald et al., 2003). This survey also reported how the social aspects associated with learning were found to be more meaningful for participants who had lower education levels. These findings are aligned with the results of the Canadian NALL survey – The WALL survey’s predecessor - (D. W. Livingstone, 2001a), which indicated that once the focus on formal, vocational learning is removed, most Canadians are interested and are participating in learning.

These results contribute to unveil the complexity of factors associated with participation in learning activities particularly as it pertains to low-skilled workers. The links between the type of learners and the nature of the learning is emerging and it appears as a much more plausible scenario than the low-skilled, low participation assumptions made in the analysis of the AETS for example (McMullan, 2004).

One of the challenges presented in this section relates to the method and the extent by which participants are asked to reflect on their reasons for participating in learning. The same can be said about the outcomes of learning, expected or actual. Most surveys do not explore the outcomes of personal interest-based activities. Yet the expected outcomes are almost one of the same as the reasons that lead to participation in the first place. What the British survey signaled is similar to what is being mentioned more and more in behavioural psychology: that the cultural, familial, social, political, and / or the organizational context of the learners may have an effect on their learning participation behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Carré, 2000; Doray, Bélanger, & Labonté, 2004; Stalker, 1993). Typical surveys do not help respondents identify the underlying motives

of their participation, such as a need to fit in or to go along with what is considered appropriate, necessary, or perceived as required. The mere concept of having a reason for participating implies an important assumption widely promoted in the humanistic field of Adult Education: that participation in learning is for the most part voluntary and that an emancipatory activity such as education must be associated with choice, freedom and empowerment (Stalker, 1993).

2.2.1.3 Trends in the employers' reasons for providing learning activities

The employers' reasons, whether communicated explicitly or implicitly to employees are typically straight forward and intuitively predictable. Several authors have researched the topic and have confirmed that in this era of globalization and increased competitive pressure, some employers rely on the development of their employees to remain ahead or at least to stay in business, innovate and cope with change (Australian National Training Authority, 2003). Others report having implemented development programs as a way to maintain a competitive advantage as well, but also to add value to the organization and improve organizational effectiveness (Antonacopoulou, 2000; Mayo, 2000) Of course not many organizations would invest the large sums discussed in the previous sections if they did not see an impact to the bottom line. Although many agree that the impact is indirect, the potential for increased revenues as well as increased retention of critical staff has been evidenced and therefore, many organizations come back for more (Hurtz, 2002).

Most of the literature in the field tends to revolve around vocational training, even though many employers have been shifting some of their investment towards more

generic, albeit still vocational, 'soft' skills (Ashton, 2004). One area that is rarely addressed is employers sponsoring informal, non-vocational learning. This area is growing, especially when it comes to wellness programs. In the U.S., there is an emerging trend towards providing employees with financial health education. Research in human resources and workforce management incite employers to do so by showing that 15% of employees suffer stress and reduced productivity as a result of financial troubles and concerns about the future (Garman, 1999). Ernst and Young (2004) reported that a large majority of employers offer financial education because it improves employee satisfaction, impacts on attrition, workforce planning and employee productivity.

Employee satisfaction and lower turnover are consistently documented and cited in employer reason for sponsoring learning. At Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology in Toronto, the latest employee survey showed a high level of satisfaction in the area professional development, particularly in relations to non-vocational learning activities such as wellness, retirement planning, parenting, and other similar activities (Seneca College, 2004). Employees indicated that when employers provided a facilitator, time, and space for those activities, it really felt as though the College cared and that it made a difference in their loyalty and commitment to their organization. Similarly, "Training" magazine reported in their annual "Training Top 100" that beyond a direct impact on sales, many saw their investment in learning as an investment in employee satisfaction, retention, time, cost and candidate attraction (Galvin, 2003).

In their study on learning cultures, Johnston and Hawke (2002) reported additional, and in many ways more critical, long-term outcomes for organizations willing to go beyond the simple, isolated sponsoring of learning activities. According to their

investigation of six organizations, those that go 'all the way' in demonstrating their commitment to learning to their employees can reap even greater rewards. Those rewards may include a more active engagement in development programs by employees, the perception of having addressed skills shortages, the reshaping of processes and positions - within the participating organization and to some extent with customers or suppliers. Some organizations also reported an increase in informal learning taking place within the workplace, an improvement in workplace relationships and finally, the perception of increased confidence in employees in relation to their capacity to learn.

This last outcome takes us back to the organizations whose main reason is to keep a flexible workforce capable of dealing with change. If learning is part and parcel of what employees do every day, a change is not likely to cause stress and impact productivity. That is, if the employer has approached learning as a long term investment which can sometimes be difficult when operating on yearly budgets and business plans.

### *2.2.2 Barriers to participation or provision of learning activities*

Barriers to learning activities can be experienced by either employees or employers. Although most of the literature is concerned with the barriers preventing employee participation in learning, there is also a body of research describing the challenges experienced by employers considering the provision of learning activities for their staff. Both aspects are reviewed in this section.

#### 2.2.2.1 Barriers to participation in learning activities experienced by employees

There is a vast body of literature on the barriers to participation in learning activities experienced by employees. The field of Adult Education Participation has

developed a specific area of research dedicated to barriers and deterrents and several models have been developed over the years. Such models will be further explored in the next chapter. In this section, survey findings related to barriers are discussed using Cross' (1981) typology, wherein barriers are considered to be institutional, situational, or attitudinal. This seemingly simple model provides a very good framework for examining the patterns and findings discussed below.

*2.2.2.1.1 Barriers to formal and non-formal learning*

The trends in barriers to formal and non-formal learning (often referred to as adult education and / or training) are relatively easy to investigate and they are therefore the most commonly investigated and reported. According to surveys, these trends have remained stable over time and respondents in Canada and in the U.K. continue to report issues related to cost, time, family obligations and / or child care, transportation, scheduling, and lack of knowledge or information about opportunities as the primary obstacles standing in the way of participation (Fitzgerald et al., 2003; Peters, 2004). What has become evident in these studies however is how often institutional and situational reasons are cited compared to attitudinal reasons, even though survey instruments allow participants to select attitude-related answers. It is believed that without external probing through careful interviewing, employees more readily point to factors that are out of their control and for which they perceive to have little responsibility.

Despite advances in participation research, as well as recognition of past survey's shortcomings, the latest surveys do little to assist respondents with such probing and do not explore their perceived barriers to participation in much depth. The data therefore

remains somewhat superficial in this regards. For example, dispositional barriers are closely related to issues of motivation and therefore socio-cognitive theories of learning and motivation developed in the last decade by researchers such as Bandura (1997) and Carré (2000) should be reflected in survey questions. Consequently, factors such as perceived competence (Bandura, 1997), self-determination (Deci & Flaste, 1995), planned behaviour (Ajzen, 2002), the individual's life context (Carré, 2000), cultural disposition (Doray, Bélanger, & Labonté, 2004) area not typically examined in large scale surveys.

The U.K. survey did address perceived inadequacies, such as the ability to learn or having pre-requisite competencies to participate in a course, which was selected by only 16% of all learners (Fitzgerald et al., 2003). However, it is possible that those questions were skewed towards formal learning and therefore may not have captured the true attitudinal profile of the respondents. The results may have been different if respondents had been offered options referring to their perceived value of learning and the influence of their family, peers or community's view of learning. Models such as Cookson's (1986) Interdisciplinary, sequential-specific time allocation life span model (ISSTAL) or his General Activity Model, wherein he stressed not only the presence and importance of multiple variables, but also the interactions, sequence and relationships among these variables, should be adopted in research methods more widely. According to Livingstone, Raykov and Stowe (2001), the only empirical evidence of these interactive effects are found in case studies which have focused on specific groups of people and have probed their views on learning opportunities. Although there is now recognition as

to the presence of these multiple factors, there are still significant knowledge gaps in this regard. This research project, with its narrow focus, intends to address some of them.

*2.2.2.1.2 Other barriers*

Aside from the explicit barriers reported above, there are perhaps other issues that stand in the way of formal and non-formal learning, but that are not captured by surveys. Barriers tend to impact those who intend to participate in learning. In previous AETS surveys (Human Resources Development and Statistics Canada, 1997, 2001) for example, 15% of the active labour force who wanted but was unable to participate in formal learning expressed having encountered barriers. However, what this data does not express as the ultimate barrier, is the fact that according to the NALL survey, 30% of the active labour force who did not participate in formal learning also did not intend or see the need to do so (Livingstone, 1999a). Although the NALL survey had a substantially different methodology and purpose, the intriguing and perhaps worrisome notion of adults not experiencing any barriers other than simply not having any desire to participate in formal learning was recently reported again by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) (2006). In this survey, the CCL reported that among non-retired Canadians 20 years and older, 60% did not participate in formal or non-formal vocational learning activities. Of this population, 55% expressed a lack of need as their reason for non-participation. In other words, 33% of Canadian workers did not and do not intend to participate in formal, vocational learning, a number very similar to the NALL's findings.

Upon further exploration of this data, more clues related to barriers to formal participation emerge. According to the AETS, only 15% of the population is experiencing

significant barriers to formal, vocational learning. This is congruent with the WALL survey findings which report that in fact, the majority of Canadians (80%) do their vocational learning informally. In fact, it is the preferred way of learning of most workers, particularly the 'non-participants' (Livingstone et al., 2001).

In effect, the differences in participation rates and the presence of barriers among various worker groups – highly educated or low-skilled – virtually disappear under the informal learning umbrella (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006). According to both NALL and WALL surveys, the majority of Canadians can be considered active and engaged learners. Although the less educated devote a similar amount of time to learning as the more highly schooled individuals, theirs is performed informally. Unlike their educated counterparts, they are less likely to also be participating in formal learning. Their informal learning may also be less oriented towards their paid work (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006). These findings unveil a new type of barrier poorly explored in the literature: recognition.

In fact, it appears as though the less educated would be more likely to desire learning if there was recognition of their past informal learning, and if informal, albeit recognized, learning was an option for future activities. In the end, although we still do not have an appropriate set of data to explore dispositional barriers in great detail, we do know that the barriers are remaining stable, despite greater information and greater opportunities provided by institutions, various lifelong learning initiatives and learning technologies (McMullan, 2004). The working class group, which has always been an elusive target for participation initiatives, may in fact be telling us that the desire and the attitude are there, but that it is barriers related to recognition and credentials of their

preferred way of learning that may need a closer look (Saunders, 2006). In the U.K., where approaches to adult learning have been consistently more progressive and advanced than other developed countries, it has been fully acknowledge that for the low-skilled workers, informal learning is an important bridge to further learning. The U.K. has therefore developed a specific strategy for informal adult learning (U.K. Department of Innovation, 2009).

*2.2.2.1.3 Barriers from employers*

According to Fitzgerald (2003), employers should pay particular attention to institutional barriers. As the sponsor, and sometimes organizer and provider of learning activities, employers could, and should, begin by addressing barriers such as lack of information on learning opportunities, guidance, counselling and career planning (Fitzgerald et al., 2003), lack of knowledge of employers expectations due to missing links with competencies as well as time, funding, assistance with learning skills while learning (Billett, 2001), lack of knowledge of the benefits of learning (Glass et al., 2002), lack of informal opportunities, recognition for participation, recognition for prior learning (Livingstone, 1999a), and a lack of management support and modelling (Ashton, 2004). Other situational and attitudinal barriers that employers can address include lack of childcare or other family support, and lack of knowledge of the employee’s own capabilities (Fitzgerald et al., 2003).

The barriers to participation are well researched in the literature and the employer’s first responsibility is to become aware of the main findings from the research, and then ensure that the barriers are taken into consideration when planning and

implementing employer-sponsored learning activities. Once the employer has removed most of the barriers over which they have control, if the implementation is still unsuccessful, then it could be recommended that attitudinal barriers be taken into consideration in greater detail.

2.2.2.2 Barriers to employer participation in employee learning

In employer-sponsored learning activities, it has been defined earlier that the employer in some way *participates* in the learning, by providing time, space, funding, materials, and / or facilitators. In that respect, the employer is also considered a provider and they too may experience barriers to the provision of learning opportunities for their employees. Aside from financial implications, there is the fact that employees approach their employers' 'generosity' towards their development in different ways ranging from opportunity to cynicism. Either way, these factors are creating barriers for providing or ensuring participation in employer-sponsored activities.

Employees who have always had a perceived control over their career and mobility have taken the employers' learning opportunities at face value to better themselves, advance and sometimes move on. This attitude has often been a barrier for employers to sponsor learning, particularly formal degrees and credentials. In Scotland, employers surveyed on their reluctance to sponsor learning activities did in fact cite poaching along with reasons such as: human capital does not provide collateral for loans and so is more difficult to finance; it is difficult to assess return on investment; the low basic educational achievement of many employees can be a difficult foundation upon which to build work based learning (Glass et al., 2002).

But if employers are sceptical, so are employees. And not surprisingly, the more sceptical employees are among the low-skilled, blue-collar workers, the same group who is consistently reported among the non- or low-participating groups in learning activities (Fitzgerald et al., 2003; McMullan, 2004). Aside from fear of poaching of the upwardly mobile workforce, the clash in perception and beliefs between employers and frontline workers is probably the next most important challenge faced by employers. For example, in unionized environments, learning has been associated with 'lean manufacturing' whereby more processes are automated and a reduced workforce is developed to be more flexible and adaptable. For many employees learning new skills masks a classic paradox underlying the capitalist employment relationship. Using both survey and qualitative data, Bratton (2001) studied the pulp and paper industry in Canada and provided evidence that workers' resistance to learning was in many ways a result of competing agendas over productivity and job control. Management wanted to upskill the workers to maximize their utilization and blur the lines between trades while workers saw this move not as an opportunity but as the ultimate threat to job control and security.

If knowledge and learning means power, it is clear that for many employees, it is more power for the employer. Authors such as Coopey (1996) argue against the trend in the workplace learning literature which ignores the asymmetric power relationship between management and employees. Such an insight is a reminder that non-participation of some employee groups is not necessarily related with employees' capacity to learn or desire to learn. It is rather the employees recognizing that learning is not a neutral process that is most likely to affect their uptake of employer-sponsored learning activities (Bratton, 2001). In facing this challenge, employers have much to do to build a climate of

trust, through a long term commitment towards mutually beneficial learning opportunities.

Low rates of participation are not only found in unionized environments where job security and fear prevail. Billett (2002) also suggests that employees may elect to not participate even in the most invitational work environment, where support is offered and knowledge made available. Employees wish to find meaning and value beyond the company's goals and procedures represented in the learning activities sponsored (Billett & Hayes, 2000). Employers must therefore go beyond simply sponsoring the learning activities: they have to provide and communicate the overall purpose, context, meaning and outcomes of learning.

### *2.2.3 Predictors of employee participation in employer-sponsored learning activities*

The general, individual and organizational predictors of employee participation in employer-sponsored learning activities are typically extracted from survey data such as those presented in section 2.1. Several studies have been conducted with that end in mind and as a result, over the years, many models of adult participation in learning have come about. As mentioned earlier, these models will be reviewed in the next chapter. In this section the predictors of participation, based on data, are discussed.

#### 2.2.3.1 Individual predictors of participation in learning activities

When examining the trends in employee participation in employer-sponsored activities introduced in section 2.1, one can begin to extract the profile of participants. Over time, these profiles have become individual predictors of who is likely to engage in what type of learning activities. Based on Livingstone's work, it should be specified

again that most employees are engaged in some form of learning (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006) but the profile of these employees helps us understand and to some extend predict the nature of this engagement.

*2.2.3.1.1 Predictors of employee participation in formal learning*

Doray, Bélanger, Motte et Labonté (2004) used the results of the Canadian 1997 AETS to conduct an in-depth analysis of the variables that led to the participation of adults in formal and non-formal activities. The 1997 AETS (Human Resources Development and Statistics Canada, 2001) was only concerned with 'adult education and training', which it defined and limited to credit or non-credit courses that were taught and organized. It therefore excluded informal learning. As a result, the predictors they identified are for formal and non-formal learning, both vocational and non-vocational Table 3, p.73).

*Table 3. Predictors of employee participation in formal and non-formal learning activities (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004)*

| Category of Indicators | **Independent Variables analyzed** | **Predictor** |
|---|---|---|
| Situational | Age | Being younger than 35, or 44 |
| | Gender | Not significant - Varies depending on the nature of the learning; |
| | Family situation | Not significant - Varies depending on the nature of the learning; |
| | Schooling | Having a higher level of initial education |
| | Work status | Being employed (for workplace learning) |
| | Employment status | Being a full time employee is only favourable to workplace learning activities |
| | Profession | Being in an intellectual profession (sciences and social sciences); Being a white or blue collar is a predictor of non-participation |
| | Work responsibilities | Being a supervisor |
| Institutional | Employer / company size | Working for a large employer / company |
| | Union | Being unionized (Livingstone & Raykov, 2005) |
| | Location | Working in a multi-site organization |
| | Industry sector | Working in health and education, finance, public administration or in public services and transportation |
| Dispositional | Initial education | Having a higher level of initial education that further enhances positive attitude toward more learning |
| | Profession | Being part of a profession with a driven culture and norms created by the group |
| | Social and life conditions | Having a social pathway and life conditions shaped by initial education |

Of all these variables, the indicators related to the socio-demographic dispositions had a significant impact relative to the other variables, with prior schooling having the most significant weight in the equation, regardless of the nature (workplace or independent), the purpose (professional or personal) or method (course or program) (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004). Some of the key workplace predictors appear to somewhat replicate and therefore compound some of the cultural dispositions that lead to participation. However, what is unclear even after this analysis is whether employers themselves replicate the conditions or if the conditions are replicated in the workplace based on who availed themselves of the learning opportunities. It could be that cultural and professional predispositions of certain individuals enhance their ability to express their need and demand for learning (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004). This highlights the fact that dispositional barriers, including factors such as attitudes, self-efficacy and historical and cultural contexts still appear to be short-changed in typical surveys. The questionnaires traditionally do little to assist respondents in exploring their perceived dispositions in more depth. The data therefore remains somewhat superficial. The UK survey did address perceived inadequacies, such as ability to learn or having pre-requisite competencies to participate in a course, which was selected by only 16% of all learners (Fitzgerald et al., 2003). However, one could argue that those questions were skewed towards formal learning and therefore may not have captured the true dispositional profile of the respondents. The results may have been different if respondents had been offered options referring to their perceived value of learning, their family, peers or community's view of learning, and so on. Such selections would have been more in tune with current psycho-social models of participation.

*2.2.3.1.2 Predictors of employee participation in informal learning*

Since studies on participation in informal learning tell us that most employees are active learners, based on rough approximations of self-reported data, the predictors of participation in informal learning are not as well defined. In fact, the WALL survey's key finding is that very little differentiates informal learners from one another (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006). What the survey shows, however, are the predictors related to the purpose, objective and nature of informal learning. This is where patterns begin to emerge and predictors begin to take shape.

For example, those with less formal schooling are devoting a similar amount of time to learning in total but much less of it is related to their work (vocational). Once again, initial formal education is a key predictor of participation in informal learning, both vocation and non-vocational. Although the total rates of participation among the less educated are high (80%), those with more education have even higher participation rates in informal learning (up to 96%) (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006). This further compounds the widening gap between the less and the more educated: those with a higher education are learning formally *and* informally whereas the less educated are relying mainly on informal learning. They also spend more of the informal learning hours on household, volunteer or personal interest subjects.

*Table 4. Predictors of employee participation in informal learning activities (Livingstone, 1999b; Livingstone & Raykov, 2005; Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006)*

| **Category of Indicators** | **Independent Variables analyzed** | **Predictor** |
|---|---|---|
| **Situational** | Age | Preference toward informal learning exclusively increases with age |
| | Gender | Not significant |
| | Family situation | Not analyzed |
| | Schooling | Having a higher level of initial education increases informal learning but rate is high for all levels. |
| | Work status | Being employed |
| | Employment status | Not analyzed |
| | Profession | Low-skilled workers rely mainly on informal learning |
| | Work responsibilities | Being a supervisor / manager increases informal learning but rate is high for types of occupation. |
| **Institutional** | Employer / company size | Working for a large employer / company |
| | Union | Being unionized |
| | Location | Not analyzed |
| | Industry sector | Working in the service sector leads to lower rates of informal learning |
| **Dispositional** | Not specified | |

Similar to formal learning, the employee's workplace situation appears to be a predictor of informal learning, although the differences are much less significant. Rates of participation in informal learning are high across all age groups, occupation and education. They are simply higher for those with strong predictors of formal learning. For example, working for a larger organization, being a manager and / or a professional lead to rates of participation between 87% and 92%, whereas working for a smaller employer, in a lower position and in the service industries results in participation rates between 84% and 88% (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006). Gender differences were not significant but age was relevant in the fact that older workers gradually rely on, and prefer informal learning more exclusively (Livingstone, 1999b).

Dispositional aspects have not been discussed directly in the WALL survey but several inferences can be made based on the predictors of participation in formal learning. Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al. (2004) closely examined and reported on how the social pathway of individuals was shaped by work and social groups where they belong and how this group membership was in turn shaped by initial education. This finding was replicated in the results of the informal learning survey, leaving us to conclude that the social, cultural disposition of employees can be defined and it does become a predictor of participation in informal learning.

#### 2.2.3.2 Predictors of employer learning sponsorship profile

The workplace context of the employees described above began to paint some of the predictors of the employer learning sponsorship profile. Already, the impact of the employer size and sector was identified as important factors in predicting the sponsoring

profile of employers. In this section, those and other factors are discussed, but this time the focus has shifted from the employee as a participant, to the employer as a sponsor.

#### *2.2.3.2.1 Employer size and sector as predictors of sponsored learning activities*

The size and sector of the employer have been identified as significant predictors of the extent and type of learning activities sponsored in the workplace. For example, greater the size of the employer, the more likely it is to invest in a wider range of learning activities, including activities not directly related to the job (non-vocational) (Glass et al., 2002). The greater the number of employees, the greater the investment in learning activities (Marquardt et al., 2002) or in other words, the smaller the firm, the less likely it is to offer learning activities (Glass et al., 2002).

When looking at the correlation from the employees' perspective, the 2003 AETS found that well-documented patterns of training participation based on firm size continue to hold. The smallest firms show the lowest rates of participation in employer-sponsored vocational learning activities. As firm size increases, so too do participation rates (Peters, 2004). The U.S.' NHES examined the relationship by looking at the likeliness that those participating in learning activities would receive support from their employer. There too, the correlation with size was found to be true: 78% of adults participating in learning activities received support when working for a large organization (500 employees or more), compared to 43% when working for employers with 1-24 employees (Kim et al., 2004). This, of course, is the overall trend. When looking at atypical participation behaviour Bélanger et al (2004) found that for low-skilled workers, it may be more advantageous to work for a smaller firm (20 to 99 employees).

The type of industry in which employers operate also appears to have an impact on their sponsoring of learning activities. In Canada, the AETS reported that sectors such as public administration, utilities and educational services showed higher rates of participation in employer-sponsored learning activities (Peters, 2004). On the other hand, the U.S. reported that in 2003, the industry sectors with the highest learning hours per employee were services, transportation, and utilities. Industries with the lowest learning hours per employee were government and manufacturing durables (Sugrue & Kim, 2004). Although there is alignment on services and utilities, the similarities and differences certainly make a statement about Canada's investment in public administration and education, relative to the U.S., perhaps pointing to not only a link between the industry sector and the likeliness to receive support for learning but also a link to the political context and culture in which the learners work and the employer operate.

##### *2.2.3.2.2 Other predictors of employer learning sponsorship*

Aside from size and sector, other predictors of employer learning sponsorship have been identified. These predictors, as described in the studies and reports below, are factors that appear to have led to the successful implementation of employee development programs where there was a good employee uptake and the development objectives were met. According to the ASTD's "State of the Industry" report, these positive factors include placing a high value on learning within the organization, having a vice-president or C-level executive make public statement in support of learning, and having executives facilitate or speak at learning events. Of all the organizations reviewed,

91% of them have a chief- level office responsible for learning, and all have a mission statement for the learning function which is linked to the organization's own mission statement (Sugrue & Kim, 2004).

This list, which refers mainly to the organizational structure of enterprises, is further complemented by Ashton's (2004) more in-depth look at systemic characteristics of organizations which appear to be necessary for learning to occur. In his study, he suggests that learning is highly dependent on whether tacit knowledge and information about the organization is readily available and shared, learning is supported, not only with money but with guidance and feedback, there are opportunities for employees to put their new skills into practice, and learning is recognized and, or rewarded in some way.

The work of Hurtz (2002) concurs with most studies on the subject and provides additional insights. Hurtz based his research on Azjen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour and found that employees who say they will participate are employees who want to participate, feel they should, perceive they can, and expect that there will be opportunities as a result of their learning. Each aspect of this statement provides clues as to the responsibilities of employers and the factors that need to be considered. For example, the implementation of learning activities will be successful if the opportunities are advertised and communicated widely. Secondly, in order for employees to feel they should participate, the behaviour needs to be modeled, rewarded, recognized and embedded in the culture of the organization. Employees will want to participate in activities which they perceive to be beneficial and not a waste of their time. The track record of the employer's will greatly influence employees in this regard. The employer's

responsibility therefore involves ensuring the high quality and value of all offerings (Hurtz, 2002).

Finally, to go along with previous comments on the organization's learning culture, Billet (2001) points out that it is important for the workplace to be highly invitational and that appropriate support be provided for learning, along with the learning opportunity itself. For workplace learning to be effectively implemented, employers have a responsibility to pay attention to how workers are afforded opportunities to participate and are supported throughout the process as it will shape the extent of the outcomes.

This last point highlights clearly the need for employers to look at learning as a process and not an event. The learning activities will not succeed in a vacuum and the employees do not live and work in a vacuum either. This holistic view of learning is perhaps one of the most challenging issues to address and sometimes redress since it involves the employer's and the employee's perceptions of self, their values, as well as their respective history and relationship with learning.

*Table 5. Predictors of employer learning sponsorship*

| Category of Indicators | Independent Variables | Predictor |
|---|---|---|
| **Situational** | Industry sector (Peters, 2004; Sugrue & Kim, 2004) | Public administration, utilities and educational services show higher rates of participation in learning. |
| | Employer / company size (Bélanger et al., 2004; Glass et al., 2002; Kim et al., 2004; Marquardt et al., 2002; Peters, 2004) | Larger organizations provide more opportunities and more funding. For low-skilled workers, it may be best to work for smaller firms. |
| | Multi-site | Not analyzed |
| **Institutional** | Presence of Union | Not analyzed |
| | Organization structure (Sugrue & Kim, 2004) | Learning leader is at the executive table and / or holds a C-level position |
| | Investment (Ashton, 2004; Conference Board of Canada, 2006) | Many learning opportunities are provided; |
| | Learning activities (Hurtz, 2002) | High value and quality |
| | Communication (Ajzen, 1991; Hurtz, 2002) | Activities advertised, promoted; benefits discussed |
| | Vision, mission, Strategic planning (Conference Board of Canada, 2006) | Mission statement for the learning function is linked to the organization's own mission / vision statement, vice-versa |
| | Infrastructure | Organizational systems and procedures are in place to support learning |
| **Dispositional** | Relationship (Bratton, 2001; Glass et al., 2002) | Trusting relationship |
| | Support (Billett, 2001; Conference Board of Canada, 2006) | Support is provided during learning process |
| | Learning culture (Ajzen, 1991; Conference Board of Canada, 2006) | Learning is modeled, rewarded, recognized and embedded in the culture of the organization |
| | Role of senior leaders (Sugrue & Kim, 2004) | Leaders speak or are present at learning activities |
| | Learning Dynamics (Ashton, 2004; Conference Board of Canada, 2006) | Learning is at the core of how the organization operates, solves problems, shares successes, failures; continuous improvement. |

In 2006 the Conference Board of Canada combined and categorized many of these predictors to create the *Learning Performance Index* (LPI). This organizational assessment tool includes 34 indicators grouped under five pillars: Vision, Culture, Learning Dynamics and Infrastructure. Employers can use this questionnaire to measure and benchmark their learning performance. The LPI provides a useful, comprehensive list of predictors of employer sponsorship and employee participation in learning activities. Consequently, the Conference Board's LPI will be part of the theoretical framework adopted for this study.

2.2.3.3 Atypical participation behaviour of adults in learning

Although the socio-demographic profile of individuals continues to be relevant when predicting participation in learning activities, trends in the atypical learning participation behaviours of adults provide additional clues. As part of their series of articles looking at the 1997 AETS results, Bélanger et al. (2004) further deconstructed the observed participation patterns by looking at the atypical behaviours of some learners. By correlating two key variables, education and participation, among atypical participants and atypical non-participants, the group was able to uncover additional observations that may have become lost in the general trends. Some of their findings are particularly relevant for this study and are in line with earlier discussions about the link between types of learners and preferred types of learning. For example, among workers with low levels of education, the typical favourable conditions of working in a large, public sector organization do not appear to have their usual correcting effect on this group (Bélanger et al., 2004). Moreover, low-skilled workers who participate in learning tend to participate

in self-directed, independent learning more so than in learning offered by their employer, and they are more likely to rely on government funding.

This new perspective on the data represents a critical reminder for the design and analysis of this study. Even the 'heaviest' predictors of participation or non-participation are not absolute. Other barriers, such as institutional barriers, can counteract and hinder the most positive conditions. On the other hand, the analysis shows that non-participatory predictors can be mitigated through government policies or interventions (Bélanger et al., 2004). This is further evidence that the collection of data will need to go beyond the basic predictors or participation and include the overall context and practices experienced by the support staff employees in the college.

### *2.2.4 The expression of demand for learning*

The equation introduced at the beginning of this chapter suggests that between the factual, contextual, and environmental profile of each party involved and the actual participation in a learning activity, there is a process wherein the demand for learning must be expressed by someone, somehow. In this section, the concept of expressing demand for learning is examined in more detail through a review of the concept's evolution and emergence in the field of adult learning, some definitions, and applications.

#### 2.2.4.1 Emergence of a concept

The concept of the expression of demand for learning emerged in the literature as a result of the observation that the rates of participation in adult formal, continued educational learning activities was remaining stagnant, or even declining in the case of Quebec (Bélanger & Voyer, 2004) at a time when both work and social life are becoming

increasingly complex and skills-based. The specific notion of supply and demand seems to have appeared internationally and in Canada in the 1990s. While expressing concern over low rates of participation and particularly over the lack of interest in learning, the 1997 AETS (Human Resources Development and Statistics Canada, 2001) research team observed:

> Lack of time because of daily responsibilities is a major barrier to education and training, as are high costs. However, the largest factor seems to be a lack of demand by many Canadians who do not see the benefits of participating in structured learning activities. To decide on appropriate policies and strategies, and to address inequalities, we need a better understanding of how demand evolves and how learning opportunities are distributed over the life span. (p. 32)

Yet the most explicit and thorough introduction and description of this concept can be found in the work of Bélanger and Federighi (2000). Described as a much needed turning point in the development of education and training policies internationally, the necessity to consider the activities situated "en amount" or "upstream" from the actual participation event, or offer, was greatly emphasized.

As a result, Bélanger and Federighi (2000) recommended an overall shift from a dogmatic, linear and pre-determined approach of the education offer to a system wherein the diversity of the adult learners' biographies and resulting diversity of learning paths must be acknowledged as the foundational piece in the learning process building blocks. In practical terms, this shift signifies the need to have an infrastructure that supports the individual with information, funding, counselling and time, support for the diagnostics and planning of learning needs, provision of the appropriate space for the expression and realization of a learning need and the overall improvement of learning environments. This is not to mention the need to further develop policies that specifically provide the

conditions that facilitate the expression of demand for learning. Such policies, which are aligned with some of the concepts and challenges introduced earlier, include the need for better information and counselling, as well as better recognition of prior learning (Bélanger & Federighi, 2000).

Overall, the concept is gaining momentum, particularly in Quebec. There, it became the general objective of the Ministère de l'Education's "Politique gouvernementale d'éducation des adultes et de la formation continue" (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2002), it was the theoretical framework for a study on Quebec's adult education centers, (Bélanger & Voyer, 2004), as well as the basis for one of the article series on the in-depth, Quebec-focused analysis of the 1997 AETS "Les contours de la demande insatisfaite" (Doray, Bélanger, & Labonté, 2004). In 2006, the Conseil Supérieur de l'Éducation made expressing demand for learning the key topic of its report to Quebec's Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport. That same year, the idea of supporting, stimulating the expression of demand for learning had made it into one Quebec's union association – la Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ) - declaration of engagement and commitment to the training of their members (Centrale des syndicats du Québec, 2006).

There is no clear evidence that the shift towards an emphasis on the process of expressing demand for learning and on all the activities "upstream" from participation is taking place in such rapid and concrete ways across the country or internationally. Nevertheless, it is a relevant, valid and much needed approach worthy of more attention.

2.2.4.2 Expressing demand for learning: definitions

A good, precise and concise definition of what is meant by "expressing demand for learning" can be found in the Conseil Supérieur de l'Éducation's report (2006). It was also introduced in Chapter 1 as being a process during which a person, a group or an organization examine their situation, set an objective, become aware of a gap which can be filled by training, and then articulates a demand for training in order to meet the set objective. This definition implies that expressing demand is in fact a process involving several steps within which several actors may come into play. Some of the steps have been further deconstructed and defined by Bélanger and Voyer (2004). For example, the triggering, decisional process is situated on a continuum from a sudden decision to one resulting from a long reflection process. Within this continuum, the following catalysts have been observed: a life or professional change, an impulsion based on a role model of success, external, persistent pressure (e.g. family), the maturing of an idea, and the pragmatic calculation of costs and benefits.

It is important to note that the work to date on the notion of expressing demand refers solely to "formation" and "éducation des adultes", which can be loosely translated as training and adult education, respectively. In other words, the concept of expressing demand for learning has been mainly studied in the context of formal learning. However, based on the definition above, there is enough evidence to believe that what is described is in fact the formulation of a learning project as defined in the earlier literature on informal learning (Tough, 1978). Tough's description of how learning projects come to be is very similar to the definition proposed earlier. Both have the same underlying

anchor in that there are a series of actions that precede the actual learning event. On that basis, there is no need to limit the concept to continuing education and training.

The term “demand for learning” also requires the differentiation between “demand” and “need”. There is a consistent message in the literature indicating that a need is something completely relative to a perceived gap between a current state and an expectation, by an individual, a group, an organization, or the government. This is inevitably subjective and can lead to contradictory positions (Maragnani & Poussou, 2010). In the proposed definition, “need” is embedded in the first two steps of the process, wherein one or several parties examine their situation and set an objective. If several parties are involved in examining a situation, e.g. an employee and an employer, it is possible that the outcome of the process, or in other words, the resulting demand for learning will differ. In other words, a “need” may or may not be expressed whereas a “demand” is in fact the act of expressing a “need”. This demand is formulated based on a perceived need, then constructed individually or within a group and it includes elements of a solution or response (Roegiers, Wouters, & Gerard, 1992). It is in that way that this study intends to differentiate between “need” and “demand” and particular effort will be made to utilize identification of need and articulation of demand accurately, purposefully and not interchangeably.

#### 2.2.4.3 Roles in the process of expressing demand for learning

Although the intent of the shift away from participation and provision towards the expression of demand puts more focus on the individual learner, several stakeholders continue to have a role to play in the process. Already, it has been discussed that unions

are recognizing their role in stimulating demand for learning and are committing to act accordingly (Centrale des syndicats du Québec, 2006). We have seen that some of the recommendations for supporting individuals in their expression of demand include the provision of information, career counselling, funding, work release time, recognition of prior learning (Bélanger & Federighi, 2000)– all of which unions can provide themselves or negotiate that employers do so. In the U.K., a pilot project saw the recruitment and training of 4,000 Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) having a direct impact on increasing the demand for learning. It was estimated that in 2,000, this initiative had 96,000 people accessed learning opportunities as a result, many of whom were new learners (Cedefop, 2003).

The type of promotional and recruitment work performed by unions and 'ULRs' are fully aligned with the recommendations presented here, which are in turn aligned with the predictors of organizational learning discussed earlier. It is therefore clear that with or without unions, employers also have an important role to play in providing the conditions that facilitate the expression of demand for learning.

By making the expression of demand the central theme of its continuing education and training policy, the Quebec government also recognizes that it has a role to play beyond policy making. This role is one of orientation, coordination of services and other associated policies, catalyst of partnerships, and maintenance of quality and equity (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2006). This role is supported in the work of Bélanger and Federighi (2000), who also introduced the role of the media and cultural institutions (libraries, museums) in creating the conditions favourable to stimulating demand for learning.

The focus on the role of the individual is for the most part welcome since it is in essence a form of recognition of diversity, freedom, personal control and pursuit of interest. However, such an utopian outlook ignores the fact that the employer, the State, the labour market, and the realities of work and life can actually play a negative role and have an impact on the individual's ability to exercise his responsibility and desire (Bélanger & Federighi, 2000). The process of expressing demand for learning is not and cannot be any stakeholder's specific responsibility. For example, Bélanger and Voyer (2004) documented how the individual's "entourage", family, friends, colleagues can play either a negative or positive role and become a key determinant factor in the decision process. In the end, all parties play a role in the process, intentionally, inadvertently, implicitly, explicitly, by default, through actions or non-actions. Examining the process of expressing learning demand will therefore involve examining the interactions between each role and the compounding or counteracting effects thereof.

2.2.4.4 Predictors and barriers of the expression of demand for learning

Without a specific, intentional action from one or a combination of the stakeholders described above, the predictors for the expression of demand for learning tend to replicate the predictors of participation, which in turn, as we have seen, tend to replicate the patterns created by initial, formal education. It was mentioned earlier that the desire to participate in learning activities is highly influenced by the level of initial education on one hand, as well as the cultural disposition of the individual on the other (Doray, Bélanger, & Labonté, 2004). The cultural attributes that lead to participation are not evenly or equally distributed within a population. Similarly, the ability or desire to

formulate a need and express demand for learning is not homogeneous either. In fact, most predictors of participation appear to be predictors of the expression of demand for learning. For example, the type of profession, the hierarchy of the workplace, and the sector of the employer are once again determinants of where demand is expressed. Professions and employers that have a culture or a formal infrastructure for the identification of learning needs appear to translate into a great expression of demand for learning. Working in education and health or in public administration, where such structures appear to be more common, is also favourable to expressing demand (Doray, Bélanger, & Labonté, 2004).

In their study on the adult education centers of Quebec, Bélanger and Voyer (2004) also identified a series of barriers that stand in the way of expressing demand for learning. Aside from typical situational and institutional barriers associated to family situations and costs, a key barrier was fear of various kinds: fear of failure, fit, unknown, isolation, or fear to repeat a negative experience with school. Although somewhat intuitive, actual interview data on such barriers are definitely welcome in the literature.

### *2.2.5 Other factors influencing the process of expressing demand for learning*

A review of the antecedents to participation in learning activities and factors influencing the process of expressing demand for learning would not be complete without a brief discussion on the least tangible of factors: relationships. In the context of learning through participation in employer-sponsored activities, there are several relationships at play. First, there is the nature and the quality of the relationship between the employer, the supervisor and the employee. Then, there is the relationship workers perceive

between knowledge, as a result of learning, and power. These relationships are explored below.

2.2.5.1 Employer-employee relationship

It was discussed in Chapter 1 that learning, both at the individual and organizational level, is becoming the key to economic success and prosperity. However, there are some who have questioned and cautioned against this simplistic causal model linking education and training to economic performance (Ashton & Green, 1996). The link between learning in the workplace and both employers and employees benefiting equally, as though they had a seamless identity and unified interests is also being questioned (Spencer, 2001). It is in fact feared that learning through employer-sponsored activities can become a new form of oppression and control in the workplace (Forrester, 2002).

In the U.K., employers have in some cases turned to Union Learning Representatives to promote the learning opportunities they provide and sponsor, so as to keep their involvement less obvious. They believe that their employees were more likely to trust their representative as having their best interest at heart and therefore would be more successful at recruiting learners (Cedefop, 2003). This type of manipulation and scheme speaks volumes about how the employer-employee relationship, and more specifically the trust level between the two parties, becomes a pivotal antecedent for employee participation in employer-sponsored learning activities. The abstract and volatile nature of this factor relative to its importance means that there is definite need for more research in the way employers communicate, build and engage employees in

learning environments. For employers to be successful in their learning initiatives, somehow the outcomes of the learning activities will need to be demonstrated as mutually beneficial (Glass et al., 2002) and the balance in perceived power and control will need to be restored.

2.2.5.2 The relationship between knowledge and power

The perceived relationship between knowledge and power is probably the most invisible, intangible antecedent employers and employees will need to contend with when dealing with participation in employer-sponsored learning activities. Firstly, this notion is taken from the perspective that knowledge is not merely the neutral outcome of a learning journey but rather a social product, integrated in the actual process and politics of learning (Kilgore, 2001). This ties knowledge and learning, and therefore connects knowledge and learning to power, under the traditional trade union maxim: knowledge is power (Bratton, 2001). The postmodern view, adopted by the union, portrays knowledge as an expression of power. In this case, power is not held by one individual or group but rather is present in the relationship among them. In this perspective, knowledge presented as a single truth is continually deconstructed and challenged. This is in contrast with the critical theory's perspective of knowledge as a tool to free an individual or a group from the oppressive force of power (Kilgore, 2001; Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997in ).

This divergent standpoint on the relationship between knowledge and power can explain the dichotomous experience of workers in relation to the learning offered by their employer. On one hand, the learning model threatens their trade unions by individualizing the employment contract, intensifying work and by undermining the

collective solidarity. It can therefore be interpreted as ultimately becoming a source of greater managerial control and oppression (Forrester, 2002). On the other hand, employer-sponsored learning gives them generic and specific skills that are transportable and enhances their employability, conditions of employment and strengthens their negotiating power (Bratton, 2001). Knowledge could actually free them from oppression and control.

Faced with this paradoxical model, workers have tended to lend their trust in their union, similar to what was observed in the U.K., and both workers and unions have interpreted the employer's negotiated demand for greater learning as a strategy to undermine the employees' control over their work and their collective security. As it was mentioned earlier, this type of reaction implies that employers will have to invest in ways to build a climate of high trust over a long period of time before unions and workers can embrace their learning offer (Bratton, 2001). Of all the barriers experienced by employers, the relationship employees attribute between control, power, knowledge and learning, could be the most challenging of them all.

## 2.3 Support staff in Ontario colleges

The support staff population in Ontario colleges is the principal subject of this research. This section therefore serves to describe the profile of this group as well as the landscape and context in which the principles, theories and concepts introduced thus far in this chapter will be examined in this study. To accomplish this overview the section includes brief descriptions of the Ontario community colleges overall and human

resources development history, as well as a description of the support staff demographics, labour organization and participation in workplace learning.

### *2.3.1 Overview of Ontario colleges*

Ontario colleges have had a relatively short, yet tumultuous life to date. Touted as a critical component of the skills gap solution for the future prosperity of the Canadian economy (Conference Board of Canada, 2007), the Ontario colleges now collectively offer programs in almost 600 subject areas, serve 200,000 full-time and 300,000 part-time students yearly, in 200 communities. College programs tend to be career-focused through a spectrum of credentials ranging from certificates, two- or three-year diplomas, bachelor degrees in applied areas of study, graduates certificates for those with post-secondary diplomas or degrees, and joint college-university programs that allow students to earn both a diploma and a university degree (Colleges Ontario, 2009). College graduates provide an important number of skilled employees to the business, engineering and technology, health sciences, community service, creative and applied arts and hospitality sectors. Despite this success, the college system still experiences challenges in establishing its true identity. These challenges extend to the realm of human resources development.

#### 2.3.1.1 Historical background of Ontario colleges

There are currently 24 publicly funded colleges of applied arts and technology, polytechnics and institutes operating in Ontario, employing approximately 12,000 full-time employees. Established in 1965, the Ontario model developed to provide a better educated and trained labour force, did not implement a system of junior colleges or

feeder system for the universities (McCardell, Willment, & Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, 1987). Instead, it implemented an alternative, parallel and theoretically equal post-secondary system for the growing number of secondary school graduates at the time. Unlike universities however, colleges had a clear community purpose. In fact, until 1986 the recruitment of students was determined and therefore limited to specific regional boundaries. After 40 years, the landscape in which colleges operate has evolved significantly. In the last two decades, the province has deregulated the post-secondary system, eliminated the catchment areas, eliminated grade 13, eliminated mandatory retirement and introduced the *Learning to 18* legislation (Colleges Ontario, 2007). On an operational level, the government has also established greater accountability measures, linked funding to performance and downloaded yet tightened quality assurance policies and procedures (Colleges Ontario, 2007). As a result of the new Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act (Government of Ontario, 2009), colleges are increasingly in direct competition with universities and other private institutions for recruiting students and for funding dollars. The lines between the institute of theory and of vocation, between privilege and access, and between concepts of academics and business are increasingly blurry (Arvast, 2006). Now firmly situated within a discourse of globalization, liberalism and in the rhetoric of a free market (Arvast, 2006), they are battling their identity and status in the post-secondary sector, persistently advocating for the recognition of college credentials (Schmidt, 2006) and for their contribution to research and career pathways. Colleges Ontario, the advocacy group representing Ontario’s 24 public colleges, is in fact about to launch a media campaign aimed at overcoming the stigma of colleges as the second best option to university

(Miner, 2007). This status battle also includes a fight for funding. In its most recent environmental scans, Colleges Ontario, formerly known as the Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario (ACAATO), was lamenting how colleges still receive less government funding per student than public secondary schools or universities in 2006 (Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario, 2006) and how this trend remains despite new provincial funding dedicated to the post-secondary sector (Colleges Ontario, 2007).

#### 2.3.1.2 Human Resources Development in Ontario colleges

The landscape in which the Ontario colleges operate presents important challenges for the planning and delivery of human resources development (HRD) programs for staff. Historically, funding has always been an issue and therefore, development of staff has been consistently perceived as a “nice to have” (McCardell et al., 1987). Staffing pressures have also not been conducive to development. Typically, the emphasis has been on spending additional resources to increase full-time positions among academic and support staff. Administrative staff, on the other hand, have at times faced hiring freezes and ever increasing workloads, leaving little time or interest for development (McCardell et al., 1987). In 1985, a report to the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities advised that the professional development of academic and administrative staff was a prime requisite for the survival of the colleges (Skolnik & Marcotte, 1985). Although the focus of the report was on academic delivery and administration, it indirectly put support staff as a secondary role in the success of colleges

and students, and consequently, this group has not been a priority in regards to development planning and resource allocation.

In 1987, that last time Human Resources Development in the Ontario colleges appears to have been given any specific, formal attention, the Executive of the Committee of Presidents initiated a process for reviewing the HRD practices of the time and for identifying future directions (Giroux, 1989). A total of 376 staff participated in this study, 22% of which were support staff employees. Although there was recognition for the institutional commitment of most colleges and the encouragement by managers to keep skills up-to-date, the report indicated that key elements to effective employee participation in workplace learning were clearly missing: recognition of staff development efforts, joint performance objectives setting between staff and manager, the perceived need for managers to be accountable for providing development opportunities, training opportunities, succession planning and development for future positions (Giroux, 1989).

It has been two decades since this report and only a few of its recommendations appear to have come to life, although this is difficult to confirm as there have been no further studies since. For example, the report greatly emphasized the need to coordinate regional and provincial HRD activities through the establishment of the College Committee on Human Resources Development (CCHRD). This committee is still in place today. However, its actual, overall effectiveness and ability to address the challenges and HRD needs of colleges has not been formally assessed. Despite annual meetings and some joint events, and perhaps as a result of the increasing competition between colleges, there is little overall strategic planning and direction being provided by

CCHRD. All activities are self-funded and voluntary and each college participates to the extent by which it may benefit itself and not as a result of a provincial strategy for the development of the college system (College Committee on Human Resources Development, 2006).

Other recommendations from the 1989 report cannot be verified either, such as the suggestion that each college dedicate a minimum of one per cent of the annual operating budget of each college to staff development. Anecdotal data seem to indicate that very few colleges are able to dedicate one percent of their salary budget – let alone their operating budgets (College Committee on Human Resources Development, 2006). Colleges Ontario's lengthy, most recent environmental scan reports do not address the issue at all (Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario, 2006; Colleges Ontario, 2007), nor have the union or the College Compensation and Appointments Council discussed it in a serious fashion in the last 20 years. Many surveys are conducted every year across the system, including various employee satisfaction and wellness surveys and in almost all cases, the recommendations include some form of training and professional development (Seneca College, 2004; Support Staff Employee/Employer Relations Committee, 2005). Yet, rarely is anyone examining the employee development capacity, culture, and processes in place in colleges and their ability to deliver on such high expectations and high level of perceived need. In 1978, Hammons, Wallace and Watts recognized the need for increased effectiveness in the American community colleges system due to competition for funding and increased demands for accountability – the same situation facing Ontario colleges today. Unfortunately, thirty years later, Bellanca (2002) was reporting that very little had

changed and recommended community colleges provide ongoing professional development for their faculty and staff in light of the increasingly diverse student body, increasing competition, new technologies, the changing government policies and societal demands. This lack of progress has been associated with the fact that most colleges in the United States integrate professional development more fully into their institutions and position it as means rather than an end onto itself (Watts & Hammons, 2002). Based on the data reported earlier, there are likely parallels between the U.S. and the Ontario community college system.

### *2.3.2 Support staff in Ontario college*

Support staff play a critical role in the day-to-day operations of organizations in any sector, of any size. More than ten years ago, there was already recognition for how the role of support staff, largely filled by females above 40 years of age, was necessitating more skills and how training provisions were not keeping pace with evolving needs (Kerka, 1995). This section paints the current working and learning profile of the support staff group within Ontario colleges and demonstrates how the same issues and concerns prevail today.

#### 2.3.2.1 Demographics of support staff group

Very little data is available on the demographics of the support staff population in colleges. The pension plan provider and administrator appears to be the only source of information in this regard. According to their data, this employee group represents an aging population and is reflective of the trends observed in the Canadian overall workforce (Conference Board of Canada, 2007). The latest available statistics show a

total of 6,495 support staff employed full-time across the province, of which more than two thirds are female (College Compensation and Appointments Council, 2007). Education data is not broadly collected for this group and therefore not readily available. According to the collective agreement data, support staff employees occupy positions ranging from basic clerical functions to highly skilled technicians. Hourly wages vary accordingly, from $15.75 to $41.10 (Ontario Public Service Employees Union, 2005).

#### 2.3.2.2 Organization of labour force

Support staff are organized through the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU). The employment contract of support staff in all colleges is governed by one common collective agreement. OPSEU was formed in 1911 as the Civil Service Association. It now represents over 115,000 full- and part-time workers in several public sectors: health care, public service, education, liquor board, as well as a variety of municipal employee groups, has nearly 500 locals and is the third largest union in the province (Ontario Public Service Employee Union, 2007). The organization follows a traditional model, and includes, aside from the overall president, a president of each local, administrative committee and several union stewards to facilitate representation.

#### 2.3.2.3 Issues and challenges experienced by support staff employees

As part of its agreement negotiations in 2003, the support staff union and management agreed to investigate components of workplace wellness. In the ensuing report it was recorded that despite increasing workload, staff generally looked forward to coming into work and felt responsible for the own work-life balance (Support Staff Employee/Employer Relations Committee, 2005). However, it was perceived by support

staff that in general morale is low, both in the work units and in their college. This morale issues appeared to be related to beliefs held by support staff related to whether they are being paid fairly, to the future of their college, their level of trust in the information received by management, and their perception of not being treated with respect and with inferiority (Support Staff Employee/Employer Relations Committee, 2005). It was also identified that a source of stress lies in the fact that support staff supervisors tend to not agree with the support staff perceptions.

Another survey, conducted at one Ontario college in 1994, documented how support staff sense of control over their job was decreasing, possibly adding stress and difficulties coping with change (Milroy, 1994). One of the key recommendations from this study was for management and labour leaders to find ways to establish or re-establish that sense of control in the perception of support staff. Although "sense of control" was not directly measured in the 2004 wellness survey, the number of barriers perceived by support staff to this day, including barriers related to career advancement and career plans (Support Staff Employee/Employer Relations Committee, 2005), it is likely that this problem is still part of the context in which support staff operate.

#### 2.3.2.4 Support staff participation in employer-sponsored learning activities

The nature and rate of participation of support staff in employer-sponsored activities in Ontario colleges does not appear to have ever been formally studied or recorded. The collective agreement guarantees a minimum of three days for professional development, implying that the employee is entitled to be released for an equivalent of three days of work (Ontario Public Service Employees Union, 2005). However, this

clause does not ensure that the employees avail themselves of these three days. In the 2005 Support Staff Employee / Employer Relations Committee (EERC) survey on workplace wellness, support staff indicated overall satisfaction with the professional development opportunities provided at their college and reported feeling ultimately responsible for seeking out learning opportunities. They also reported that both the college and their supervisors provide time and resources necessary to pursue these activities. Yet, only about one quarter of the support staff respondents indicated taking all or some of their professional development time (Support Staff Employee/Employer Relations Committee, 2005). In the same survey, over 50% of support staff reported not receiving feedback on their performance on a regular basis and that their position descriptions were current. Based on earlier discussions on precedents to participation, there is perhaps a link here between the lack of feedback and attention paid to job descriptions and the perceived need for workplace learning.

In regards to who has control of the decision on how and when it would be best to utilize the three days, the collective agreement states: “The employee will submit a written application to his / her supervisor outlining the purpose of the professional development activity and the expected skill enhancement contemplated from the activity” (Ontario Public Service Employees Union, 2005). There is an implication in this statement that the utilization of these three days ought to be initiated by the employee. Consequently, some employees believe that if the learning activity was management-initiated then it ought to be above and beyond the three days. In this view, the pre-negotiated days are reserved for employee-initiated learning, an entitlement which some employees could regard as their days to be spent as they wish. Anecdotal reports indicate

that there is no clear consistency among and within colleges as to the interpretation, use and application of this clause (College Committee on Human Resources Development, 2006).

This issue is linked to the informal observation that colleges have varying methods of managing, recording, planning, providing, and funding employee participation in learning activities. These methods range from organized, centralized structure to hybrid models of centralization, or completely open, business unit models. Although this has never been formally researched, it appears as though policies and procedures also vary greatly from college to college according to size and available resources.

Overall, the basic patterns of employer-sponsoring practices and employee participation among support staff in colleges appear to match patterns and predictors observed in Canada and internationally. Anecdotally, predictors such as initial education and employer size seem to apply. As for the industry sector, according to earlier data, employees working in the college sector should have a higher incidence of access to and participation in learning compared to their counterparts in other sectors. However, an examination of the relative weight of variables influencing participation reported that initial education was having a greater influence than any other factor (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004). This may have an impact for the support staff group being studied. With the exception of a few technical jobs, support staff positions at the college tend to require lower levels of initial education than faculty or administrative positions. Although there may be cases of underemployment among the support staff group, there is an increased likelihood of this group having lower levels of initial, formal education. It is

therefore possible that the education level of this group will indeed overshadow the influence of their employment sector when it comes to their behaviour in learning participation.

## 2.4 Summary

Through a review of the literature, this chapter has painted a picture of the context in which the study takes place. In the first section of the review, we established that despite relatively small increases and some noticeable changes in the participation behaviour of older, educated workers, the overall patterns of adults and employee participation in learning have remained fairly constant, in Canada and abroad, over the last thirty years. These findings were found to be mirrored in the results of surveys examining the sponsoring practices of employers.

In the second section of the chapter, the review of the antecedents to participation in learning highlighted key areas of knowledge in the literature: reasons, barriers, predictors of participation, the process of expressing demand for learning, and other factors such as employer-employee relationships and power. The employee reasons for participation in formal and non-formal learning are increasingly attributed to learning activities being made mandatory by employers or regulatory bodies. Participation in informal learning is most often associated with personal interest. Meanwhile, the employers' reasons for sponsoring learning tend to focus on the need to remain competitive and improve their organizational effectiveness.

The barriers to participation have not changed significantly over the years and most surveys continue to report institutional and situational barriers as the determinant

factors reported by adults and employees. On the employer side it was established that issues of power and control may be barriers. Employers must therefore go beyond offering learning opportunities. They need to communicate the overall purpose, context, meaning and outcomes of learning to employees.

According to the literature, the predictors of participation in learning have also been stable over the years, particularly for formal learning. Age, schooling, employment status, employer size and sector continue to be important factors determining future employee participation in learning. In light of such stable predictors and participation trends, researchers have begun to explore the process that precedes participation as a way to further understand the factors that lead to participation. This emerging concept includes the roles of the parties involved in the process as well as the interactions between the parties. It is through this lens that additional predictors and barriers, this time related to the process and the relationships, were identified as potential factors.

To situate the knowledge base described above in the context of this study, a brief overview of the support staff population in Ontario colleges was provided. In this section, we found that this workforce group is older, predominantly female, and works in a unionized, fairly stable, public sector environment. Limited funding for this fourty-year old post-secondary education system has generally resulted in limited opportunities for professional development among this group.

# CHAPTER 3

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

# CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study is anchored in four key concepts:

- Lifelong learning, and consequently adult learning, as a desirable ideal for the prosperity of most countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001);
- Participation in learning as the result of a process (Bélanger & Federighi, 2000);
- Profiles as predictors of participation in formal and informal learning (Doray, Bélanger, & Labonté, 2004; Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006)
- The presence of inhibitors and facilitators of the process that precedes participation in learning (Bélanger & Voyer, 2004).

It is with these key concepts in mind that the overall theoretical model of this study was introduced in Chapter 2 (Figure 1, p.39). In this chapter, the model is further defined and each concept is further positioned relative to the others and relative to the problem statement. This overview therefore shows how theories has been adopted and in some cases adapted for the purpose of this study.

## 3.1 Underlying concepts of the study

This section highlights the four underlying concepts that emerged in the literature as being the most relevant and appropriate to shape the theoretical framework of this study. Each is reviewed individually below.

### *3.1.1 Lifelong Learning and Adult Learning*

The concept of lifelong learning is so broad, it is vague. It is for this reason that the concept has been narrowed down to Adult Learning to more appropriately define the scope of this study. This is based on the observation that when attempting to discuss pragmatic issues of processes, participation, provision, responsibility, and accountability, as is the case in this study, it becomes clear that Lifelong Learning is best considered a concept and not a field of research. For in fact, as examined in Chapters 1 and 2, the review of the literature on Lifelong Learning policies and programs in various jurisdictions revealed that in almost all instances, it was really Adult Education, Training or simply Learning that was usually in question, not Lifelong Learning in its broadest sense.

This position on Lifelong Learning is based on UNESCO's early definition of Lifelong Education, which recognized the lifewide aspect of learning (Faure et al., 1972). It is also based on UNESCO's later expansion of the term "education" to "learning" to encompass all forms of intentional learning (Delors, 1996). These combined definitions make Lifelong Learning an umbrella concept that demonstrates how it spans an entire life – from cradle to grave - as well as how it spans all forms of learning, from informal to formal and vocational to non-vocational learning. Within this umbrella concept, several compartments exist. Over time, in the literature, these compartments have been created somewhat artificially to define the parameters of various fields of research, e.g. Early Childhood Education and Adult Education. The scope of this study crosses over several compartments: Adult Education, Higher Education, Training, Informal Learning, vocational and non-vocational learning. As a result, a new compartment has been created

under the label of Adult Learning to clearly delineate the area of Lifelong Learning that will be explored and to clarify how the nomenclature will be used throughout the study. For example, in this model, “Education” is considered formal and lifewide, and therefore may or may not be vocational. On the other hand “Training” is considered to be solely vocational but it can be formal, non-formal or informal. Since this study includes “Education”, “Training”, as well as non-vocational informal activities, the term “Learning”, was chosen to represent all forms. Moreover, since the population studied is 18 years and older and no longer part of the initial education system, the term Adult was deemed most appropriate. Consequently, the scope of this study will be defined as Adult Learning (Figure 2, p.111). This definition will provide the framework for the design of the questionnaire and for determining what type of learning respondents ought to include in their answers and in their mapping of learning activities.

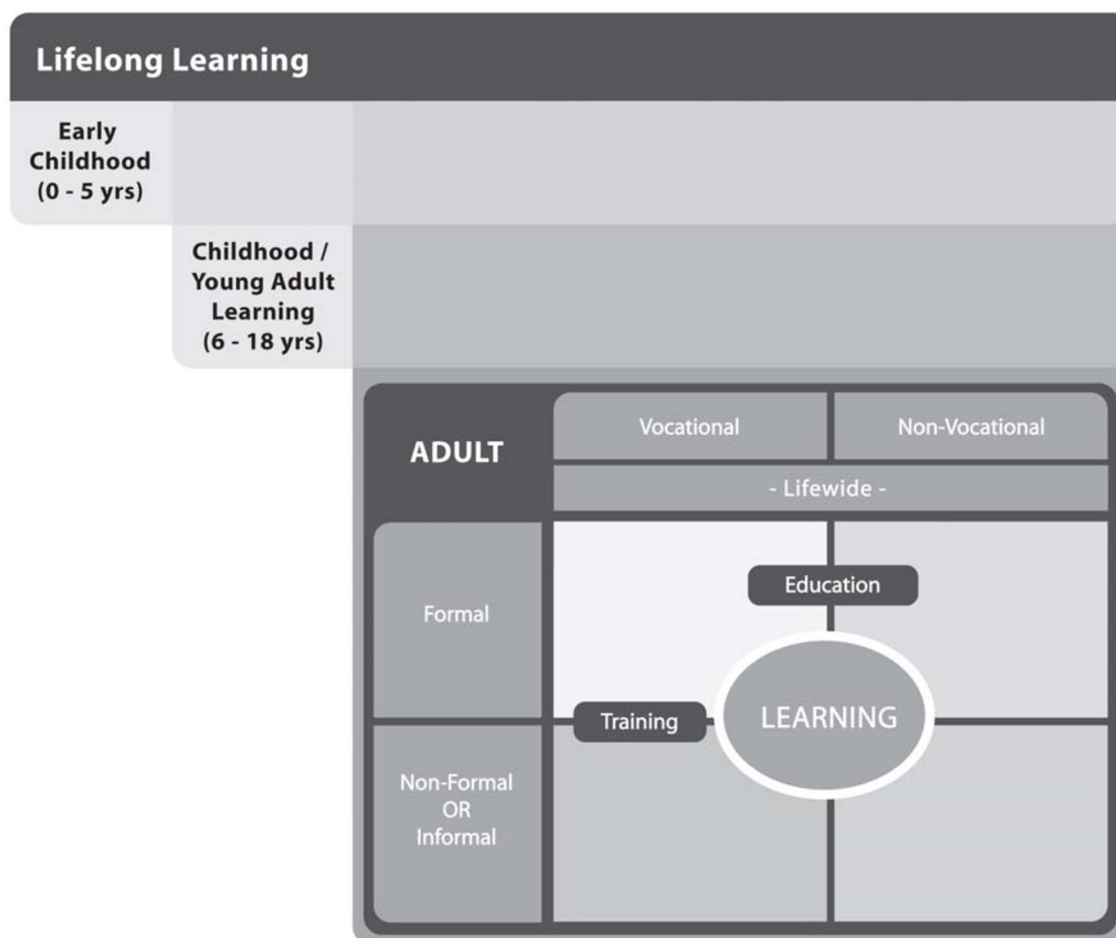


*Figure 2. Positioning the scope of this study on Adult Learning within UNESCO's concept of Lifelong Learning (Delors, 1996)*

### *3.1.2 Participation as the outcome of the expression of demand*

As discussed in Chapter 2, in recent years, there has been recognition that participation in learning is the outcome of a process wherein a demand for learning is formulated. This realization came about when barrier-based models failed to explain why so many adults did not appear to have unmet learning needs in the first place, let alone face barriers to participation (Human Resources Development and Statistics Canada, 2001). This concept has been the subject of several studies and papers in Quebec (Bélanger & Voyer, 2004; Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2006), likely as a result of

Bélanger's earlier work with Federighi (2000), in which they began to formulate the idea that something beyond the static profile of the adult was having an impact on participation.

Unfortunately most models of participation position the individual against participation in learning. Over the years, it has been recognized in the literature that the individual and his or her learning activities are based on the presence of multiple variables as well as on complex interactions between all of the variables. In Chapter 2, we saw how the main theoretical models of participation have evolved from psychological, e.g. Boshier's Congruence model (1973), to more interaction-based psycho-sociological models such as Rubenson's Expectancy – Valance model (1977), Cross' Chain of Response model (1981), or Cookson ISSTAL model (1986). More recently, Manninen (2004) continued to expand on the number of variables that interact on the psycho-social continuum (Figure 3, p.113).

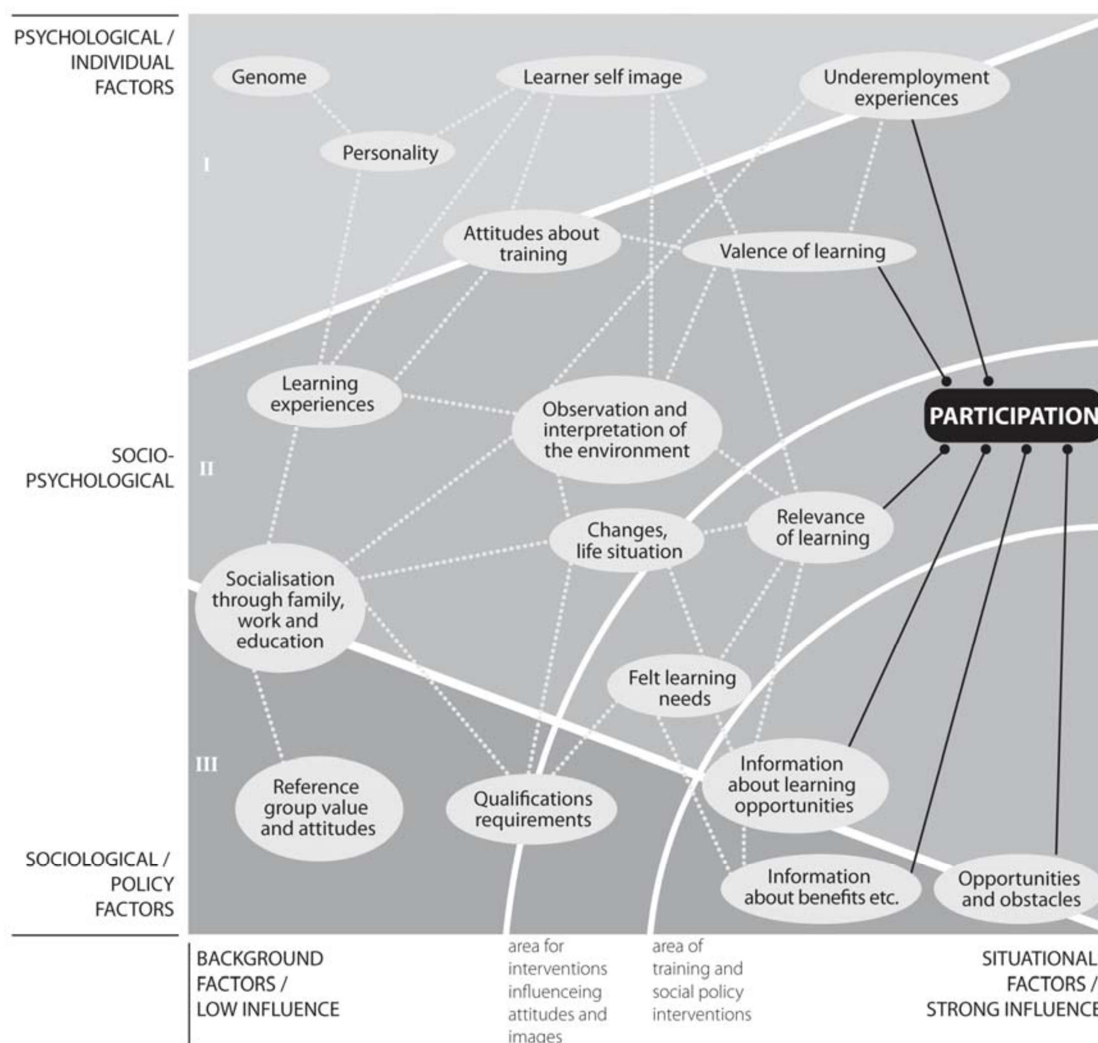


*Figure 3. Towards systemic understanding of participation theory; A postmodern model (Manninen, 2004)*

The problem with each of these models, including Manninen's attempt at a comprehensive reflection of an individual's complexity, is how none seem to capture the dynamic, process-based concept of participation as an outcome. They pin the individual, in all its complexity, *against* participation, as though the individual and participation were two static "entities". Bélanger and Voyer's model (2004) intends to capture the

process involved in formulating the demand for learning, in other words, the link between the two "entities". This study will use this framework to construct the interactions between the parties, and will analyze these interactions in the context of each party's profile and the resulting outcome on the participation behaviour of the employees.

### *3.1.3 Predictors of participation*

In this study, the predictors of participation established by Doray et al (2004) and by Livingstone and Scholtz (2006) described in Chapter 2, will be used as an individual predictor model for mapping the state of participation in learning among college support staff and determining where behaviours are typical and atypical. Those predictors were chosen in part because they are based on Canadian data and therefore provide appropriate benchmarks for this study.

The individual predictor model will be used to design the *Learning Profile Survey*, identify the atypical population sample for the interviews, and for predicting the expression of demand for learning. The latter is based on the findings by Doray, Bélanger and Labonté (2004) which showed that the predictors for participation and for expressing demand tended to mirror one another.

The organizational predictor of participation will be mainly provided by the Conference Board of Canada's *Learning Performance Index* (LPI) (2006). As per the discussion in Chapter 2, the LPI is Canadian, allows for appropriate benchmarks and provides the only list of organizational predictors of learning presented as a model and with a corresponding measuring instrument.

### *3.1.4 Use and adaptation of barrier-based models*

Over the years, several models of adult participation in learning have been proposed: Boshier (1971), Cross (1981), Darkenwald and Merriam (1982). Rightly or wrongly, most of them are anchored in our knowledge of the barriers that prevent adults from learning. Cross (1981) for example, provided the Adult Education Participation (AEP) field with a classic, albeit simplified, typology of barriers. Adding to an earlier model by Johnstone and Rivera (1965), which included Situational barriers (cost concerns, individual, family or home related problems) and Dispositional barriers (negative perception of the value of education in general, indifference toward learning, lack of self-confidence in one's learning abilities, or a general tendency toward non-affiliation), Cross' model included a third category: Institutional barriers – incompatibilities of time and/or place, questionable worth or relevance or quality of educational opportunity. In 1982, Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) suggested that a fourth category – Informational – be added, although it could easily be contended that this fourth category is a subset of Institutional deterrents, since providers play an important role in disseminating information about learning opportunities.

Scanlan and Darkenwald (1984) then utilized their Deterrent to Participation Scale (DPS), analogous to Boshier's (1971) Education Participation Scale (EPS), to provide empirical evidence for the need to use a multidimensional conceptualization of deterrents construct in participation research. Most interestingly, this study showed that deterrents were a more reliable predictor of participation than earlier models relying on motivational orientation or socio-demographic variables.

The main flaw in the models developed by Boshier, Cross, and Darkenwald & Merriam, as introduced in Chapter 1, was the assumption that all adults would voluntary participate in learning if it were not for barriers standing in their way. Stalker (1993) challenged this view by providing empirical evidence for a two-dimensional approach to participation: other-determined and self-determined, recommending that all research in participation deterrents first take into account the context of the learner vis-à-vis the learning activity. Carré (2004) provided further support to this notion by pointing out how over the last 25 years, adult education has taken for granted that adults necessarily volunteer for learning and that past behaviour may be a stronger predictor of participation. Doray, Bélanger and Labonté (2004) agreed with this line of thinking and added cultural and social factors as predictors of demand, indicating that adult education was in many ways a social activity which, like many other activities, has a different value or legitimacy for different people. Their comparative study among non-participants showed that non-participation could be partially explained by cultural differences, which would lead individuals to have a positive, distant or even aversive attitude towards education, putting respondents an uneven playing field when it comes to expressing interest or demand in participation.

By separating voluntary participation from other forms of participation, Stalker, Carré, Doray and others have provided important insights into some of the weaknesses found in widely-used participation models. Mainly, their findings tell us to move beyond a barrier-based view of participation but to continue to look at predictors of participation in a multi-dimensional way to respect and reflect the complexity of human behaviour. For example, in the earlier discussion on atypical participation behaviour, it was mentioned

that some predictors (e.g. education) can be invalidated by other forces (employer) (Bélanger et al., 2004). Moreover, the increasing pressure from government policies and competitive organizational environments discussed earlier will likely lead to more mandatory or "strongly encouraged" participation in learning, which may in turn lead to patterns that begin to defy typical socio-demographic and motivational orientation trends currently reflected in theoretical models and observed in the AETS and other surveys. These additional considerations put somewhat of a dent in Cross' and in all barrier-based models.

However, with a slight adaptation, it is possible to create a revised version of the model to include the external, cultural and contextual factors that have been brought to light in recent years. All of these factors can fit in one of the three categories of barriers Cross originally published: dispositional, situational, and institutional. The proposed change is to move away from a barrier-centric model and adopt a learning-centric model. Instead of three types of learning participation barriers, we will create a model that represents the three dimensions of the adult employees who are being studied (Figure 4, p.117).

*Figure 4. Learning profile model. Adapted from Cross' Barriers to Adult Education Participation Model (1981).*

This approach combines what is known about barriers and about other predictors of participation into one model, which does not pit an individual against learning or assumes that all individuals are learners. It merely categorizes various aspects of their overall profile: who they are, what they are and in what context. This model will be used to frame the profile of the supervisor and the employer as well.

### 3.2 Framework of this study

When these theoretical concepts are combined and integrated with the context and population of this study, the following overall framework emerges: Employee participation in employer-sponsored learning activities as the outcome of the expression of demand for learning. The expression of demand is a process affected by the interactions between the profiles of each party involved: the employer, the union, the employee and the supervisor. These profiles can be treated as dispositional (d), situational (s), and institutional (i) predictors of expression of demand. Finally, the outcome of this interaction may take various forms, ranging from non-participation to participation in informal, non-vocational learning to formal, vocational learning. This framework is an adaptation and integration of the models reviewed in the literature. It therefore results in a modified version of the model introduced in Chapter 2, which was designed to frame the literature (Figure 1, p.39). On the other hand Figure 5 (p.119) summarizes the model that will frame this specific study.

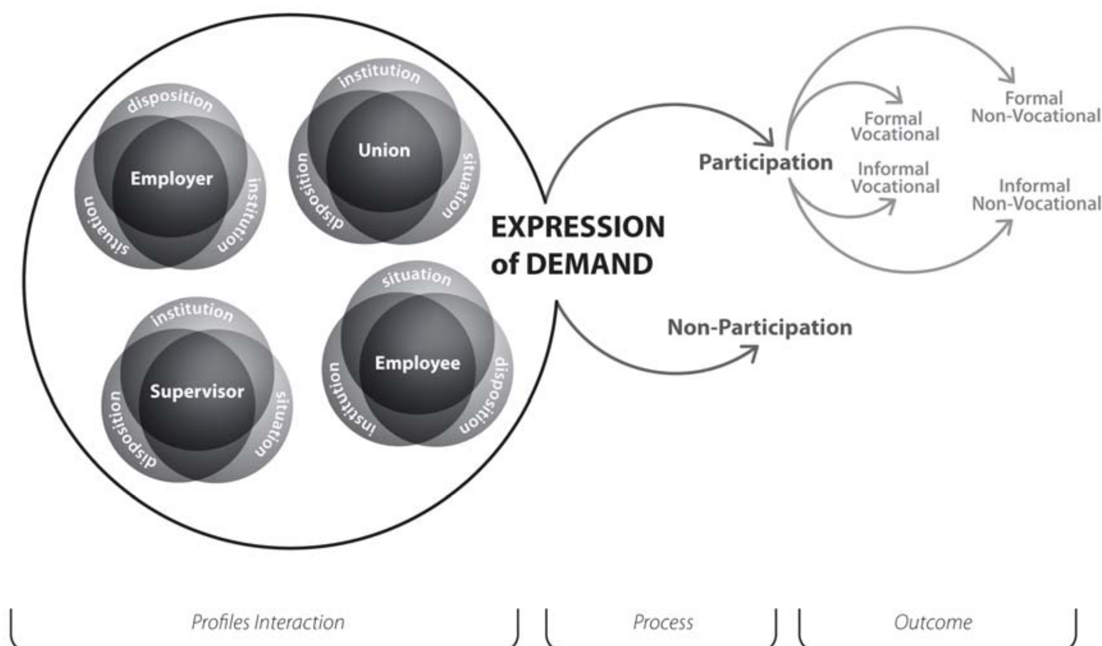


*Figure 5. Framework guiding the design and analysis of the study.*

## 3.3 Summary

The key concepts of the study and their relationships were synthesized in this chapter in order to present the building blocks that shape the overall theoretical framework (Figure 5, p.119). This theoretical framework is based on having first defined the scope of the research as being inclusive of all Adult Learning, which was differentiated from Lifelong Learning. It is also based on the concept of expression of demand as a process, which represents a shift away from viewing the employees and their participation as two static entities. Instead, expression of demand puts the focus on the interactions between all the parties involved and accepts that participation is the outcome

of a process. Despite the departure from the profiles of employees and employers as direct predictors of participation, profiles are still included in the framework because they are considered potential predictors of the expression of demand. In this model, aspects of the profiles are categorized according to a typology developed in typical barrier-based models. This further emphasizes the departure from barrier-focused non-participation models. All of these concepts were integrated to generate a theoretical framework that will form the basis of the study.

# CHAPTER 4

# METHOD

# CHAPTER 4: METHOD

This chapter describes, in detail, the methods used for this research. It presents the design of the methodology, including the sampling method. Following this overview, the data collection and treatment plans are introduced along with the matrices that will be used for the data analysis. Once those are reviewed, the chapter concludes by addressing issues of validity and the ways in which the threats will be minimized.

## 4.1. Overview of research design

This study is designed around the principles of qualitative research methodology. Using a combination of critical qualitative research and case study methods it will investigate through a series of interviews, surveys and a collection of documents, how the employer, the supervisors, and the support staff of one large, urban community college in Ontario express their demand for learning.

### *4.1.1. Overview of the research site landscape*

In order to contextualize the design of this study, it is important to paint an overall picture of the landscape within which the research is taking place. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the study will focus on the management and support staff at a large, urban community college in Ontario. There are approximately 460 full-time support staff at this college, spread over several campuses. This group of employees is represented by the Ontario Public Service Employee Union. Professional development is somewhat part of the culture at this college and several incentives have been negotiated as part of the province-wide collective agreement and locally through the Human Resources

Department. Those professional development policies, procedures, as well as the collective agreement clauses related to professional development are generally what guide supervisors and employees. It is within this context that the methodology of the study was designed.

#### *4.1.2. Methodologies selected*

Based on the nature of the research question, the context of the employee group being researched and the system in which this process is taking place, it was determined that a combination of a critical qualitative research and case study methodologies was best suited for this project. The critical component serves to question, examine and critique the assumptions that have been made in the literature to date about both the participation behaviours of this employee group and the investment behaviours of employers. There is much to explore in regards to the process being studied, particularly since the asymmetrical relationship between the employer as provider and the employee as learner is often overlooked, yet not lost on the employees (Bratton, 2001; Coopey, 1996).

The case study in this particular research mainly served as a "macro sampling" method. Although each college has its own culture and specific idiosyncrasies, the community college sector is somewhat uniform in its history, purpose, structure and operations, across the province of Ontario and in Canada. Through her participation in several provincial and national associations, the researcher is aware that many of the procedures and policies that guide and govern the professional development practices of support staff tend to be negotiated or at least discussed provincially and nationally. As a result, it is a case study to the extent that the investigation was limited to one site and

therefore only explored the processes in place at one college. However, the unit of analysis was not purely what characterizes this topic: the key focus of the study is a critical analysis of a process between several parties, not the groups themselves (Merriam, 2002). It is for those reasons that the combination of critical qualitative and case study methodologies was selected.

#### *4.1.3. Sampling*

The section above described how the case study method is, in and of itself, a form of sampling. The entire full-time support staff population of a large, urban community college in Ontario (n=462) was initially the subject of this research project. Once the responses were analyzed, support staff ($n \leq 5$) with an atypical participation profile were selected along with their respective supervisor ($n \leq 5$), the union president (n=1), the college president (n=1), the leader of the human resources department (n=1) and the leader of the training and development department (n=1). Moreover, this college was selected because participation cannot be easily explained by obvious variables such as lack of funding. Other, smaller and more remote colleges are often faced with those issues and the employer's offer as well as the employees' access is therefore limited.

At a more micro level, the sampling of the support staff population at the study site was initially be purposive (Merriam, 1988) because the research project began without any information on the subjects, other than them being full-time support staff at one of the sites (n=462). There was therefore no theoretical or practical basis for establishing criteria during the first round of data collection. The subjects were invited to

respond to a survey which provided the researcher with the socio-demographic and learning profile of the employees who responded.

The sampling then became one of convenience and one of quota (Merriam, 1988). The sampling was convenient because it was based on those who responded and therefore subjects were in a way, self-selected. The sampling then moved to a quota selection wherein the researcher studied the results of the survey and categorized respondents in four subgroups, with the intent to select interviewees from the first group:

1) participants in formal learning with a low number of participation predictors: atypical participants

2) participants in formal learning with a high number of participation predictors: typical participants

3) non-participants in formal learning with a low number of participation predictors: typical non-participants

4) non-participants in formal learning with a high number of participation predictors: atypical non-participants.

High and low numbers of participation predictors were determined as follows. Since the population studied works in the same organization, only three remaining factors served to differentiate individuals: age, level of education, and job type. Individuals received a score for the presence of each predictor based on the significance established in the literature (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004; Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006; McMullan, 2004) (Table 6, p.126). Traditionally, the job type predictor is based on jobs being low-skilled or blue-collar, white-collar, administrative or technical. In order to replicate this predictor typology, the job classification system established in the collective

agreement was aligned accordingly. At the time of the study, all support staff jobs were subject to a letter-based classification system (A to L) which determines the employee's pay scale based on the level of complexity and the skill level required for the position. For the purpose of this study, this grid was used to categorize employees according to low-skilled jobs (A to D, e.g. caretakers, general clerks), mid-level skills (E to H, e.g. support service officers, library technicians), and higher-skill level (I to L, e.g. programmers and systems analysts).

*Table 6. Scoring Matrix for Interviewee Selection*

| Scoring Matrix | | |
|---|---|---|
| Presence of Selected Predictors | Score given to respondent | Number of respondents who received score n= |
| **Age** | | |
| ≥ 45 years old | 0 | 39 |
| 35 to 44 years old | 1 | 23 |
| ≤ 34 years old | 2 | 26 |
| **Education** | | |
| High school diploma or equivalent, or less | 0 | 15 |
| Certificate, college diploma, or other academic professional qualification, or other professional certification | 1 | 39 |
| Degree or post-graduate degree | 2 | 35 |
| **Job Type** Classification as per Collective Agreement | | |
| A, B, C, D (Low-skilled: caretaker, clerk, food service work) | 0 | 7 |
| E, F, G, H (Mid-level skill: computer operator, general maintenance, operating engineer) | 1 | 63 |
| I, J, K, L (High-skilled: counsellor, nurse, Early Childhood Education worker) | 2 | 13 |

Once the scoring scheme for the selected predictors was applied, respondents were further organized according to their participation in formal learning and placed into the following matrix:

*Table 7. Categories of respondents according to their participation in formal learning and the presence of predictors in their profile.*

| | *Presence of Predictors Score $\leq 2$* | | *Presence of Predictors Score $\geq 3$* | | *Total* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ***Atypical Participants*** ***n=*** | ***%*** | ***Typical Participants*** ***n =*** | ***%*** | *n =* | *%* |
| *Participants in formal learning* | *5 Sample for interviews* | *6* | *33* | *37* | *38* | *43* |
| *Non-participants in formal learning* | ***Typical Non-Participants*** ***n=*** | ***%*** | ***Atypical Non-Participants*** ***n=*** | ***%*** | *n =* | *%* |
| | *26* | *29* | *25* | *28* | *51* | *57* |
| *Total* | *32* | *36* | *57* | *64* | | |

The selection of the sample in the atypical participant group proceeded "with an arbitrary number of participants in one category" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984in; Merriam, 1988). Atypical learners are those who defy the predictor models of participation and exhibit learning behaviours that were not anticipated by the presence or absence of typical factors among the most significant variables. In this case, although five had been pre-determined as the arbitrary maximum number, three respondents were found to be atypical respondents willing to be interviewed. The supervisor sample consisted of the supervisor of each support staff interviewed as part of the quota sample.

It is important to note that this categorization does not suggest a greater value to formal learning. Formal learning is used as a differentiator since the intent is to identify

atypical behaviours. Participation in informal learning is quite common. On the other hand, it is uncommon for those with a high number of predictors to only be participating in informal learning (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006). Moreover, atypical participants are of great interest because they can contribute to uncovering inhibitors and facilitators to employee participation beyond the individual factors and predictors already known. Studying the exceptions rather than the norm was utilized by Bélanger et al. (2004) and deemed as an effective and appropriate way to uncover more information about participation. Moreover, because the main purpose of this study is to uncover information about a process and ultimately arrive at recommendations that can solve the problem and be generalized to other workplaces, the selection of a small number of deviant or extreme cases has been found to be the most strategic approach in qualitative research (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This is because the typical or average case is often not the richest in information. Atypical or extreme cases often provide more insight because they surface more basic mechanisms and active more actors in the situation studied. This study in the antecedents to participation in learning is from both an understanding-oriented and action-oriented perspective. It is thus more meaningful to achieve greater clarity in the deeper causes of the problem of non-participation. Typical participants would further confirm the known barriers and inhibitors to participation. It is therefore more appropriate and in line with the object of the research to select a few cases chosen for their validity and the insight they can bring (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Overall, the design of the study carefully took into consideration the need for an appropriate alignment between the research questions, the landscape, the methodologies

and the sampling method. This alignment, and hence the research method, was further strengthened through the use of suitable data collection instruments and treatment. Those are described in the next section.

## 4.2. Data Collection and Treatment

This section introduces the data collection process and treatment phases. Each phase involves its own set of instruments and approaches to the data treatment. Information on those aspects of the data collection is provided as well.

### *4.2.1. Data Collection: Procedure and Instruments*

The data collection procedure was intended to reflect the sampling method that had been selected for this study. The sampling method described in the earlier section shows how the various steps in the data collection process needed to cascade from one to the next.

*Table 8. Summary of Research Design: Instrument, Sampling, Data Collection*

| Population, source / Data collection Instrument | Full-time Support Staff (Employees) | Supervisor of support staff (Supervisors) | College Representatives (Employer) | Union Representatives (Union) | College Documents |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Survey | PHASE I<br>Support Staff *Learning Profile Survey*<br>(n = 462 invitations) | PHASE III<br>*Learning Performance Index* Survey<br>(n ≤ 5) | PHASE V<br>*Learning Performance Index* Survey<br>(n=3)<br>President<br>Head of HR<br>Head of PD | PHASE VII<br>Union President<br>( n = 1) | |
| Interviews | PHASE II<br>(n ≤ 5)<br>Support Staff: Atypical Participants | PHASE IV<br>(n ≤ 5)<br>Support Staff Supervisor | PHASE VI<br>(n=3)<br>College President<br>Head of HR<br>Head of PD | PHASE VIII<br>Union President<br>( n = 1) | |
| Artefacts | | | | | PHASE IX<br>Relevant documents* referred to in interviews |

(*Relevant documents may include the Collective Agreement, Human Resources policies and procedures, report on employee development participation and programs, the college strategic plan.)

As a result, a sequence involving nine data collection phases was identified: support staff survey, support staff interviews, support staff supervisors interviews and survey, college (as defined in the previous section) interviews and survey, union interview and survey, and artefacts. Each phase, along with its place in the sequence, is described below.

#### 4.2.1.1. Learning Profile Survey of Full-time Support Staff

Once permission was obtained to conduct research and the appropriate ethics certificates were issued, the data collection process was initiated as per the proposed design. The Human Resources department and the Union prepared and sent an announcement electronically (Appendix 1, p.286) to all full-time support staff employees with easy internet access (n=362) and on paper, via inter-office mail for those off-campus or without desktop computers (n=100). Although the memo was jointly signed by the Head of Human Resources and the Union president, it was sent via the Human Resources email account. A few days later, these employees (n=462) received their invitation to participate in the research project, directly from the researcher (Appendix 2, p.287), using the same delivery format as the announcement. Both the online survey and the paper-based survey began with a participation consent form (Appendix 3, p.288). The *Learning Profile Survey* can be found in Appendix 4 (p.290). More details on the purpose of this survey and the rationale for the selection of this instrument are provided and discussed in section 4.2.2.1.

#### 4.2.1.2. Interviews with Selected Support Staff

Phase II of the data collection procedure consisted of individual interviews with the three support staff respondents who fell in the atypical participants group. The researcher communicated with each individual by phone to invite them for an interview. All interviewees signed a consent form (Appendix 5, p.305). The interviews did not begin until the employees' supervisor had been reached as part of phase IV and their

participation in the research had been confirmed. If the supervisor did not wish to participate, a different employee would have been selected.

Interviewees were asked to complete the *Learning Performance Index* Survey from the Conference Board of Canada (2006) (Appendix 6, p.308). They were then interviewed using a questionnaire (Appendix 7, p.313) adapted, with permission, from the protocol used by Quebec's Conseil Supérieur de l'Éducation for their 2006 study on the expression of demand "En éducation des adultes, agir sur l'expression de la demande de formation: une question d'équité" (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2006). When the interviews were conducted, the verbatim were coded in categories according to the type of interviewee being analyzed. The support staff group became Employee 1, Employee 2, Employee 3, coded as Ee1, Ee2 and Ee3.

4.2.1.3. Survey and Interviews with Selected Support Staff's Supervisor

Once the interviews with the employees were completed, individual interviews with their respective supervisor took place. In preparation for this phase of the data collection, each supervisor was given a generic yet corresponding name to keep the association with the employees. Supervisor 1, Supervisor 2 and Supervisor 3 became Sr1 associated with Ee1, Sr2 associated with Ee2 and Sr3 was associated with Ee3 for the purpose of coding the verbatim results. At the beginning of this interview, and once the consent form was signed, the supervisors were asked to complete the *Learning Performance Index*. They were then taken through the same interview protocol used for their staff (Appendix 7, p.313). The interview questionnaire is essentially the same. Only

the phrasing of the questions had been modified to reflect the change in the point-of-view being provided.

4.2.1.4. Survey and Interviews with representatives from the College and the Union

As introduced in Table 8 (p.130), the point-of-view of the organization, in this case, "the college", was obtained by collecting and synthesizing data provided by those who typically have a direct leadership role in shaping, communicating and implementing the culture, design and delivery of employer-sponsored learning activities (Ashton, 2004): the college president, the head of human resources, and the head of professional development. Together, these representatives provided the employer profile in our theoretical framework (Figure 5, p.119). The president of the union was also interviewed to represent the fourth interacting group in our model. Data on the perspective of the college and the union was collected using the *Learning Performance Index* survey and a third version of the interview protocol so far used with staff and with supervisors. Once again, the interview questionnaire is essentially the same, with only the phrasing of the questions modified to reflect the perspective of the interviewees. These individuals were also given generic names for coding purposes: College 1, College 2, College 3 and College 4. However, to preserve confidentiality, each number was assigned randomly. The union president was included in this coding category, also for confidentiality purposes. Only the researcher knows which College interviewee is the voice of the union.

#### 4.2.1.5. Collection of Artefacts

In order to complement the data collected from all three informant groups, the final step in the data collection process was a collection of all internal documents relevant and related to the employees' participation in learning activities. Examples of such documents included the collective agreement, Human Resources policies and forms related to learning and development, and various reports on employee participation in learning activities and programs at the college. As other documents were mentioned or referred to in the interviews, they were added to the collection of artefacts assembled for this phase.

### *4.2.2. Data Collection Instruments*

The research design and data collection procedure described in the previous sections indicate that surveys, interviews, and artefacts were the three sources of data for this study. The surveys and the interviews involved the use of pre-existing, validated instruments adapted for the purpose of this study. Each one will now be described in more detail.

#### 4.2.2.1. Survey instruments

Each phase of the data collection procedure involved the use of survey instruments. The *Learning Profile Survey* is designed to yield information that paints the learning participation profile of the key informant groups: the employees. This portion of the research seeks to identify the rate, nature, context, and the reasons for participation in learning activities. The questionnaire used is based on the 2002 British survey on adult

learning, which was adapted and shortened for the purpose of this study. Unlike its Canadian and American counterparts, the British survey is the survey most inclusive of all learning types and is therefore the most suitable pre-existing, validated survey for this study. The original questionnaire was adapted from a phone survey into an online and paper format. Also, since the population and the scope of the study are much narrower than this national, all encompassing survey, many of the sections were eliminated. For example, all questions detailing employment status, mode of learning, use of computers, level of literacy or access to information by providers were eliminated. The questions kept were those that can inform the predictors identified in the theoretical framework. One other deviation from the original survey is the time frame used by respondents to identify and recall learning activities. The original British survey asked to go back three years whereas the Canadian approach in the AETS or the WALL surveys is to typically go back 12 months. Since the predictor model developed for this study is based on Canadian data, the *Learning Profile Survey* only included a 12-month period. It is a long questionnaire yet it was designed to ensure that responses could be categorized based on the presence of predictors and based on the rate and type of learning participation.

The *Learning Performance Index*, the second survey used in this study, was used to identify the presence of organizational predictors of participation highlighted in the literature and to rate the perceived learning performance of the organization. The survey is a copyrighted, validated instrument from the Conference Board of Canada but proper permission was obtained. The advantage of this survey is that it has the potential of closing one of the knowledge gaps discussed in Chapter 1, related to information about the organization and the learning offer. Typically, when relying solely on instruments

such as the *Learning Profile Survey* inferences need to be made about the learning offer based on the participation and non-participation results. The flaw in this logic is obvious and the *Learning Performance Index* provides an opportunity for the employer to contextualize the participation results with what they know is the learning offer and the overall culture and infrastructure for learning in the workplace. Since the interviews are conducted with all four parties, the study will take advantage of the opportunity to collect organization-based information from the perspective of the recipients in addition to the providers of learning. For the purpose of the analysis the college and the supervisors are considered the contributors to the learning performance whereas the union and the employees are considered the parties at the receiving end of the organization's learning performance. Hence there will be a chance, through this survey, to assess the alignment in perception among parties and to identify if and, or what the causes of a misalignment might be, and if the extent of the alignment may represent an important antecedent to employee participation in learning. To the researcher's knowledge this survey has never been used in conjunction with a *Learning Profile Survey*. This unique approach and the use of this survey therefore provide an opportunity for new insights.

#### 4.2.2.2. Interview questionnaire

The semi-structured interview questionnaire used in this study is designed to examine, in much more depth, the dispositional and institutional predictors of participation that surfaced in the results of the survey. The interview allowed participants to describe the steps involved in expressing their demand for learning, the roles played by each party, the expectations they have, and the factors that facilitated or inhibited their

participation in an employer-sponsored learning activity. These types of data are not easily captured through surveys. Interviews therefore played a key role in the data collection of this study because the subject at hand is one of process and behaviour. Most adult education surveys, particularly those attempting to explore barriers, have been criticized over the years for their inability and attempts to capture such complex phenomenon through multiple-choice questionnaires (Hui & Smith, 2003; Rubenson, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Aside from completing the profile of each group, the interview instrument is also the most suitable way to get each group to describe the process they associate with the expression of demand for learning.

The interview protocol used with all interviewees (Appendix 7, p313) is an adapted version, with permission, of the *Guide de discussion: La formation et l'apprentissage à l'âge adulte. Les participants à une formation dans le milieu de travail*, used in the 2006 study of the expression of demand for continuing education amongst adults in Quebec (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2006).

### *4.2.3. Data Analysis*

The data analysis process, focus and method differed slightly based on the instrument and the data collection method. The nature of the data collected is mostly qualitative. However, the perceptions regarding the college's learning performance, the presence of participation predictors, as well as the level of participation were quantified and shown as ratings. More details regarding the purpose and the focus of the analysis for each set of data is provided below.

#### 4.2.3.1. Analysis of the *Learning Profile Survey* Results

The results of the *Learning Profile Survey* were analyzed to determine the overall state of participation in learning in the college and thus answer one of the research questions. The purpose and method for establishing the overall state of learning at the college was twofold. On one hand, it tells us the extent to which the population being studied is behaving according to existing predictor models and the extent to which this group is an overall typical population of employees in a typical workplace. This will help us determine to extent to which the findings will be applicable to other organizations and support staff groups. To do so, the findings for age, initial education and job type were cross-tabulated with participation in taught learning and in formal learning. The cross-tabulations were analyzed using the Chi-Square test, and a Logistic Regression Analysis was conducted. The results were compared to the correlations established in the Canadian AETS findings (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004).

*Table 9. Learning Profile Survey Data Analysis Matrix*

| **Topics investigated** | **Responses / Coding** | |
|---|---|---|
| Demographic data | Job type / Age / Persons living with subjects / Highest level of education | |
| Learning data | Formal and Non-Formal Learning | Informal Learning |
| Participation | Yes / No | Yes / No |
| Purpose | Vocational / Non-Vocational | Vocational / Non-Vocational |
| Mode of delivery | Face-to-face / Distance / Other | Face-to-face / Distance / Other |
| Type of learning | Formal or Non-Formal | N/A |
| Number of hours | 1-8 h / 9-35 / >35 | 1-8 h / 9-35 / >35 |
| Status of completion | Complete / Aband. / In Progress | Complete / Aband. / In Progress |
| Place of learning | Work / Academic Institution / Community / Home / Other | Work / Institution / Community / Home / Other |
| Organizer | Employer / Union / Academic Inst. / Community / Other | N/A |
| Payer | No Fees / Employer / Self / Both | No Fees / Employer / Self / Both |
| Employer Vs Personal Time | Work Hours / Own Time / Both | Work Hours / Own Time / Both |
| Help during learning | Family & friends / colleagues / supervisor/ instructor / no help | Family & friends / colleagues / supervisor/ no help |
| Type of help | Materials / funding / transportation / child care/ content/ other / no help | Materials / funding / transportation / child care/ content/ other / no help |
| Information | Family, friends, colleagues / employer / union / community / media / no information | Family, friends, colleagues / employer / union / community / media / no information |
| Initiator to seek information | Contacted them / they contacted me / no information | Contacted them / they contacted me / no information |
| Initial reason | Compulsory for my job / help my current job / help future job / personal need or interest | Compulsory for my job / help my current job / help future job / personal need or interest |
| Main motivation for vocational activity | Get a new job / develop my career / gain new skills / change career / get a raise/promotion / no reason / other | Get a new job / develop my career / gain new skills / change career / get a raise/promotion / no reason / other |
| Main motivation for non-vocational activity | Do something interesting/ improve knowledge and skills / gain a qualification / meet people / start something new / do something with spare time | Do something interesting/ improve knowledge and skills / gain a qualification / meet people / start something new / do something with spare time |

The responses to all other questions were reported as raw numbers and percentages. This approach follows the reporting method and style found in the national and international surveys examined in the literature review. It therefore makes the findings comparable.

4.2.3.2. Analysis of the *Learning Performance Index*

The results from the *Learning Performance Index* were analyzed in two ways. First, by totalling the scores and using the interpretive scale created by the Conference Board of Canada (Conference Board of Canada, 2006).

*Table 10. Learning Performance Index: Data Analysis Matrix*

| Respondent Groups (averaged scores)<br>Organizational learning performance pillar | College interviewees<br>1 2 3 4 | Supervisors interviewed<br>1 2 3 4 | Union president<br>1 2 3 4 | Support staff interviewed<br>1 2 3 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Vision<br>The extent to which learning is part of the vision of the organization | | | | |
| Infrastructure<br>The systems and procedures in place to support learning | | | | |
| Culture<br>How the culture in the college supports learning | | | | |
| Learning Dynamics<br>The extent to which learning is at the core of how the college operates | | | | |
| Investment<br>The extent to which the college invests in learning and development | | | | |
| Organizational learning performance, overall score | | | | |

This determined the perception of each party vis-à-vis the extent to which they are working in a “learning organization”, as defined by the Conference Board. Then, the scores of each group were compared to identify any discrepancy or similarities, and if so, between which party. In other words, since each group was being asked to describe the same organization, this showed whether the perceptions vary. Differences in perception would further inform the answers to the research questions. Table 10 provides the matrix for recording the data from the survey.

#### 4.2.3.3. Analysis of Interview Results

The methodology used for the analysis of the interview results was a hybrid approach of qualitative methods of thematic analysis. It combined the data-driven inductive approach (Boyatsis, 1998) and the deductive a priori template of codes approach (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). This approach is often used in health care and education research, and its rigour has been documented (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Once the interviews were transcribed, the analysis began with the creation of a codebook based on the research question and the theoretical framework used for this study. This a priori template was entered in the QSR NVivo data management program and was used for “chunking” the data. Three entries were put through this initial interpretation phase in order to refine and finalize the codebook. At that stage, the concept of decision-making emerged clearly as a stand alone step in the process preceding participation in a learning activity. Initially, the concept of decision-making was embedded in the expression of learning demand and was described as the moment

where the participant makes a decision to participate and therefore initiates the process of expressing demand for learning. However, in the case of employee learning in the workplace, it quickly became evident that there was a decision to be taken after the expression of demand and before participation could occur. This concept was therefore added to the coding template (Table 11, p.142). With the codebook finalized, all interview data was coded accordingly. Each box became a "chunk" or topic to organize the interpretation and the presentation of findings.

*Table 11. Antecedents to participation: interview data coding template*

| | | Current state of the process | | | Expected process | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Expression of Demand | | Decision-making | Expression of Demand | | Decision-making |
| | | Identification of a perceived need | Articulation of the demand for learning | | Identification of a perceived need | Articulation of the demand for learning | |
| The process of expressing demand for learning | | | | | | | |
| Roles | College | | | | | | |
| | Union | | | | | | |
| | Supervisor | | | | | | |
| | Employee | | | | | | |
| | Other | | | | | | |
| Conditions | Facilitators | | | | | | |
| | Inhibitors | | | | | | |

For the interpretation phase, the researcher used a crystallization organizing style (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) in order to identify the trends and themes emerging from the data. Those trends and themes provided the framework for the discussion section.

#### 4.2.3.4. Analysis of Artefacts Collected

The artefacts collected were analyzed as part of the section where each of them came up. Once they were placed in the appropriate analysis "chunk", the content was reviewed in combination with the interview data to further contribute to the trends and the themes being crystallized inductively. Although the presence of some of the artefacts in itself can be a predictor of participation in learning (Ashton, 2004; Conference Board of Canada, 2006), the interpretation of the artefacts' content had the potential to shed additional light on the factors that facilitate the expression of learning demand.

## 4.3. Validity

As with most qualitative research, there are potential threats to the validity of this study. However, with careful planning and a thorough approach, the data collection and analysis process was designed to minimize those threats. The researcher ensured descriptive and interpretative validity by sharing her initial findings with the interviewees to seek feedback on the interpretation. Most important is how the same questions were examined from five different angles: the employees, the supervisors, the college, the union and the internal documents. This multi-sided perspective allowed the researcher to rely less on her own interpretation and description and more on what emerged from the interviews. The theoretical validity was the threat of least concern in this particular study.

There is a wide consensus in the literature on the participation behaviours of lower-skilled workers and on the importance of facilitating the expression of demand, although the former has emerged more recently.

On the other hand, issues of generalization and evaluative validity were of most concern to this study based on the sampling method. A careful analysis of the employee representation from the first group of survey respondents was a key step in the process. It is described in more detail in the next section.

### *4.3.1. Survey response rate and employee representation*

Once the *Learning Profile Survey* was launched, the full-time support staff employees responded to the invitation in varying degrees. Table 12 (p.144) summarizes the participation rates at various stages of the survey process and shows how in the end, 89 employees completed the survey after accepting to participate in the study.

*Table 12. Number of employee responses to survey invitation*

| Full-time Support Staff Employees | Invitations | Consented to participate in survey | | Completed survey after accepting | Respondents with profile qualifying for interview | Qualified respondents who agreed to be interviewed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Accepted | Declined | | | |
| Online survey | 362 | 108 | 12 | 85 | 4 | 2 |
| Survey mailed | 100 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 |
| **Total** | **462** | **113** | **14** | **89** | **5** | **3** |

Although the overall number of respondents is relatively low, upon reviewing the span of departments and campus represented by the participants, it was deemed to be a fair sample of the employee population. There are approximately 125 departments at this college on three main campuses and six satellite locations. The responses came from approximately 75 departments at six campuses. Upon discussions with the union local president and the head of professional development, it was also felt that the participation rate was saturated based on the typical participation profile and the circumstances of the targeted group.

In addition to the college representation, once the interviewee group was identified, the gender representation was also examined. It is summarized in the table below (Table 13, p.145).

*Table 13. Gender representation among survey respondents*

| | **Total number of respondents**<br>n= (%) | **Participation in Formal Learning**<br>n= (%) | n= (%) | **Atypical Respondent & Interviewee**<br>n= (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **YES** | **NO** | |
| **Female** | 58 (65%) | 10 (71%) | 48 (64%) | 2 (67%) |
| **Male** | 31 (35%) | 4 (29%) | 27 (36%) | 1 (33%) |

The gender representation in each category was deemed consistent and reflective of the support staff employee population gender breakdown in the college system, which typically reports more than two-thirds of staff being female (College Compensation and Appointments Council, 2007). It therefore seemed to align more with the population itself

than with participation behaviour. This is consistent with the literature where gender has not been found to be a strong predictor of participation (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004). Overall, this gave further confidence in the sample and the data saturation. In addition, prior to proceeding with the interviews, the gender representation of the interviewee group and their supervisor was considered. The dyads were as follows:

*Table 14. Gender representation in employee-supervisor dyads*

| | Supervisor | Employee |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | F | M |
| 2 | M | F |
| 3 | F | F |

This representation meant that three out of four possible employee-supervisor gender scenarios would be part of the data collection. This too contributed to strengthening the confidence in the data collection process and in the decision not to pursue any actions to broaden the total number of respondents. The gender of the college representatives and union leader was not considered since their voice and therefore their interview contributions were to be the voice of the college and the voice of the union, not their own.

#### *4.3.2. Limitations*

The most important limitations of this study are related to the sample size and the ability to compare to other similar studies. Although the overall confidence level is

satisfactory, the relatively small number of respondents particularly limits the ability to run cross-tabulations that can be compared with various correlations established in the literature. However, since the objectives of this study did not involve testing these correlations but rather focused on documenting a process, it was not deemed appropriate at the time to put additional pressure on respondents nor to consider additional measures to increase the response rate. This is because the ultimate launch date of the online survey coincided with an unexpected labour strike vote date as well as the peak of the summer holidays. The issue related to the vacation period was addressed by resending the survey to non-respondents after two weeks. In fact this period was deemed most appropriate since other times of the year have a heavier workload for support staff (e.g. fall start up, convocation in fall and spring, intense use of student services mid-semester). In the end, it is likely that the work climate had the most impact on the employees' interest in the survey. The intensifying period of negotiations between the support staff and the colleges had been going on for almost one year by the time the strike vote was called. Moreover, the email invitation, although jointly signed by the Union and the head of Human Resources, was sent by Human Resources. This technicality was unavoidable and the overlap with the strike vote date was as unfortunate as it was coincidental.

In the end, it is recognized that the circumstances in which phase I of the study was conducted were less than ideal. The employees at the college voted in favour of a strike with one of the highest percentages in the province and the negotiation deadline was looming. The climate of uncertainty and distrust was not conducive to employees adding a task to their day or to respond to an invitation sent by their employer. Further discussions with the head of Professional Development and the head of the Union

confirmed that this response rate must be related to the work climate since staff have shown higher levels of participation in previous college-wide surveys (60.6% participation rate in the employee survey conducted in 2008). The climate was also not conducive for the proper socialization, promotion and broad discussion of the value and importance of the study among management and staff. All those with whom the researcher interacted in order to conduct this study were distracted by the contingency planning taking place in the event of a support staff strike at the busiest, most critical time of the academic year: September. It is realistic to surmise that as much as the parties involved were supportive of the researcher's personal academic endeavour, it became low on their priority list in light of their organizational, administrative responsibilities. The study was therefore not promoted widely, in a variety of forums and with ample notice, unlike what the college typically does for its own employee survey deployment. This college-wide employee survey is intensively advertised and promoted to employees as their opportunity to have their say in the culture and behaviours demonstrated at the college and as a way to influence their future and the future of the college. By comparison, the invitation to this study was only sent once, to the support staff only, and it could not make the same promises about how their participation and the results of the study would realistically have an impact on their future.

This unforeseen reality meant that the only alternative would be to postpone additional data collection well after the ratification of the collective agreement, possibly six months later. At this crossroad in the research process and taking into account the objectives of the study, the level of participation was deemed to be enough to continue to phase II. This is because the focus of the study is on the antecedents to participation, not

on the quantitative data obtained through the survey. Consequently, a greater emphasis was always intended to be placed on the results of the interviews. The response rate was therefore sufficient to meet the role played by the survey.

## 4.4. Summary

This chapter detailed the research methodology that has been designed for the purpose of this study. After introducing the overall sequence of the data collection process, a description of the sampling process, the instruments and the analysis procedure was provided in order to contextualize how and why they align with the overall methodology and how each component will contribute to answering the research questions introduced in Chapter 1. For each phase of the study, the data collection instruments were described, the analysis procedures were detailed and sample matrices were introduced and discussed. Issues of validity were presented with corresponding solutions that minimized the threats. Through this chapter, it was possible to verify that the chosen sequence, population, process, and instruments were pertinent for the proposed study. The methodology described here yielded the necessary type, quantity and quality of data.

# CHAPTER 5

# RESULTS ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

# CHAPTER 5: RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter begins by providing the results of the *Learning Profile Survey* in order to analyze and determine the overall state of learning at the college where the study took place. This first analytical step is intended to compare the college's data with national and international trends and contextualize the findings of the interviews presented in the subsequent sections of the chapter. Having established that the college's state of learning is relatively aligned with patterns reported in the literature, the second section of this chapter offers the analysis of the interview results to describe the current and expected states of the antecedents to participation in employer-sponsored learning. The emerging themes identified during the analysis of the results are then discussed. Through this discussion, issues affecting the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making are highlighted.

## 5.1 State of Learning at the College: Survey Results

This section presents and analyzes the findings of the individual *Learning Profile Survey* conducted among the support staff population of the college as well as the results of the *Learning Performance Index* conducted among the interviewees. This portion of the study was intended to contextualize the results of the study to determine if the overall state of workplace learning is typical and similar to the trends observed in national and international learning surveys. The data is therefore presented according to the data analyses typically reported in the literature (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009b; Fitzgerald et al., 2003; Kim et al., 2004; Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006; McMullan, 2004). The first portion focuses on the employee profile and learning behaviour while the second part presents the findings about the employer.

In the event that the state of learning is as would be expected according to our theoretical framework and existing data, there will be added justification for the potential generalization of the interview findings.

### *5.1.1 State of employee participation in learning activities at the college*

The data extracted from the *Learning Profile Survey* provided a broad range of comparison points with national and international trends. In this section, all the key variables collected in the survey are analyzed and compared to the results of previous studies and surveys discussed in Chapter 2. This is intended to determine the overall state of employee participation in learning activities at the college and to provide a benchmark for the analysis of the interview results. This section therefore examines the rates of participation trends by type of learning activity as well as the correlation between the learner education, occupation and age profiles and the type of activities chosen by the learner. Other variables, such as gender, relationships and learning assistance are also examined to further establish the extent to which the population studied is typical.

#### 5.1.1.1 Employee participation rates by various types of learning activities

The learning participation rates of adults, and in this case, full-time employees, are most often categorized by type of learning activities. The chosen nomenclature (formal, informal, vocational, non-vocational) for the various types of learning activities examined for the purpose of this study was introduced and explained in Chapter 2. Table 15 (p.153) summarizes the overall findings among the population surveyed. It is important to note that totals are only provided for each type of learning activity and not for each nature (vocational / non-vocational). This is because the survey design asked respondents to identify the nature of one type of activity at a time. Consequently, the

nature of the activity represents an “either / or” scenario whereas the type of activity reflects the fact that respondents may have participated in “either / or both” formal and informal learning.

*Table 15. Instances of employee learning participation by type and nature of learning activity*

| Nature of learning activity / Type of learning activity | Vocational n= | Non-Vocational n= | Not specified | Total n= |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Formal | 30 (34%) | 7 (9%) | 1 | 38 (43%) |
| Informal | 64 (72%) | 19 (21%) | n/a | 83 (93%) |

The general trends uncovered through this first analysis are in the range reported in most national and international surveys and according the organizational predictors of participation (Table 16, p.155). For example, the rate of formal learning by support staff at the college where the study was conducted (43%) is very much comparable with the Canadian findings a year earlier (38%) (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009a) and the U.S. data (44%) (O'Donnell, 2006). The college results are lower than the British findings (62%) (Snape et al., 2006) but if we consider that the U.K. uses a three-year reference period, they become comparable as well.

The overall reported participation in informal learning at the college (93%) is also along the national average in Canada (91%) (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006). The U.S. also report rates of informal vocational learning (63%) (Kim et al., 2004) similar to the study site (72%) . Overall, the only notable differences appear to be in regards to formal, non-

vocational learning and informal non-vocational learning. In the case of formal, non-vocational learning, the participation rates at the study site (9%) is less than half the U.S. national average (21%). For informal, non-vocational learning, the college reports less than a third of the U.S. average (21% at the research site compared to 70% in the U.S.). In fact, the results for informal learning are generally lower than those found in the WALL survey and the U.K. survey. Since non-vocational learning is the only category with such a marked difference compared to other surveys, it is possible that by conducting the research in the workplace and by inviting respondents to comment on learning activities of their choice and / or recall, the respondents were much more likely to have vocational learning top of mind. The survey tool used for this study was originally a tool used for phone interviews and allowed for prompting. The respondents were also reached at home. On the other hand the WALL survey focused only on informal learning whereas this survey was introduced in the context of research in workplace learning. All these factors could have contributed to respondents identifying and / or recalling vocational learning activities more predominantly.

*Table 16. Rate of support staff employee participation at the study site in comparison with national and international rates of participation in four types of learning activities.*

<table>
<tr><th></th><th colspan="3">Rate of Participation by Support Staff Employees at the Study Site (College)</th><th>Canada AETS 2003 (McMullan, 2004) CCL 2008 (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009a)</th><th colspan="2">Canada WALL 2004 (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006)</th><th colspan="3">U.K. NALS (Snape et al., 2006)</th><th colspan="2">U.S. NHES 2003 (Kim et al., 2004; O'Donnell, 2006)</th></tr>
<tr><td>Formal Vocational</td><td>34%</td><td rowspan="2">43%</td><td rowspan="4">97%</td><td>38%</td><td colspan="2"></td><td rowspan="2">62%</td><td rowspan="4">67% Voc. F&I<br><br>25% N-V F&I</td><td rowspan="4">80%</td><td>27%</td><td rowspan="2">44% (O'Donnell, 2006)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Formal Non-Vocational</td><td>9%</td><td></td><td colspan="2"></td><td>21%</td></tr>
<tr><td>Informal Vocational</td><td>72%</td><td rowspan="2">93%</td><td>88% (CCL 18-74 years old)<br><br>33% (AETS 25-64 years old)</td><td>85%</td><td rowspan="2">91%</td><td rowspan="2">65%</td><td colspan="2">63% (Kim et al., 2004)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Informal Non-Vocational</td><td>21%</td><td></td><td></td><td colspan="2">70%</td></tr>
</table>

[shaded box] Indicates type of learning not addressed in survey.

Note: Individual percentages for specific types of learning activity do not always equal the sum of one category due to learners reporting more than one type of learning activity.

Overall, the general trends in participation rates show that the group participating in the study is exhibiting participation behaviours with many parallels to previous, similar studies conducted in Canada, the United States and United Kingdom. When taking into account differences in context and survey design, the results are so far indicating that the college being studied represents a typical organizational environment in regards to employee learning.

#### 5.1.1.2 Learner profile and type of learning activities

The study of participation trends typically involve an examination of the profile of the learners in relation to the type of learning activity they choose. This is the type of analysis behind most predictor models because there seem to be a significant correlation between the learning profile and the type of learning activity the learner chooses. For example, highly educated, high-skilled younger workers participate more in formal learning whereas the older, lower-skilled, lower-educated worker tend to choose informal learning (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004; Lambert et al., 2009; Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006). The profiles of the respondents were initially analyzed based on the variables found to be significant (education, occupation and age) and the results were reported in Chapter 4 (Table 7, p. 127) to determine typical and atypical participants and non-participants. Here, these three variables are revisited to examine if the expected links between learner profile and type of learning activity is found at the study site.

The results in Table 17 (p.157) show that the group reporting formal learning has a higher level of education, is younger, and holds jobs clustered in mid- to higher level positions.

*Table 17. The profile of employees who participated in formal learning*

| Selected Profile Variables / Types of learning activities | Education n= | | Occupation n= | | Age n= | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Participation in formal learning** | 4 | high school or less | 4 | low-skills | 11 | 45 or older |
| | 13 | college diploma or certificate | 23 | mid-level skills | 14 | between 35 and 44 |
| | 21 | degree or more | 7 | technical / high-skilled job | 12 | 34 or younger |
| No participation in formal learning but **participation in non-formal and informal learning** activities | 6 | high school or less | 1 | low-skilled job | 17 | 45 or older |
| | 18 | college diploma or certificate | 30 | mid-level skilled job | 7 | between 35 - 44 |
| | 11 | degree or more | 2 | technical / high-skilled job | 11 | 34 or younger |

This is consistent with the predictor models. Meanwhile, the group who did not participate in formal learning activities but reported non-formal or informal learning has a higher instance of college diplomas or certificates and is older than the formal learning group. This group has jobs clustered in higher pay bands but this is most likely a function of their age and seniority in this unionized organization. Still, the formal learning group had seven respondents (n=7) in technical / high-skilled jobs, whereas the non-formal learning group had two (n=2) in the same category. Over all, the results were as expected and seemed to indicate that the population studied was fairly typical.

Cross tabulation analyses were therefore conducted for this group, but, due to the small sample, the correlations for education, occupation and age could not be verified nor confirmed as being significant. The logistic regression reports did show however a higher odds ratio expectation for participation in formal learning for younger, particularly the 35

to 44 age group, in a high-skilled or technical job, with a degree or more (Appendix 8, p.317). This is the type of trend that the predictor model would have anticipated. The studied group therefore continued to exhibit typical participation behaviours, in both rates and types of learning activities.

5.1.1.3 Impact of other variables on employee participation

To further confirm the nature of the population being studied, other variables such as gender, relationship with supervisor, presence of spouse or children, level of assistance sought and received during the learning process, all captured in the standard survey design, were analyzed for their link to participation. This is despite the fact that these variables have not been found to have an impact on participation in previous studies and they are therefore not considered strong predictors of participation (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2004).

The results of the survey indicate that of those who participated in the study, 75% reported a sufficient or high level of trust, respect, support and understanding with and from their supervisor. Only 11% indicated a low level while 12% said they were neutral on the subject. The level of trust, respect, support and understanding is spread out among all types of learning and therefore does not appear to be linked to formal, non-formal or informal learning. However, overall, the rate of participation in any learning is high among this group of employees (97%) and so is the rate of participation in vocational learning (72%). These high numbers may be related to the high percentage of positive or neutral relationships with the supervisor. This is further supported by the fact that two of the three non-participants in any learning were among the small group who reported low levels of trust. Consequently, and although inconclusive due to the sample size, it could be argued that the quality of the employee's relationship could indeed be a factor in the

participation of learning, particularly job-related learning. If nothing else, the findings here do not show any evidence to the contrary.

In this group, there was almost an even split between respondents indicating living with a spouse (48%) and without (52%). There were no clear links to their status and their participation, non-participation or to the type of participation. The presence of children, which was found to have an unexplained yet positive impact on non-formal workplace learning and a negative impact on other types of learning (formal, informal, self-directed) in the Doray et al study (2004), did not manifest itself in this survey. Thirty-seven percent (37%) reported living with children compared to 63% without children at home. But there was no clear link to the learning participation rate or type.

The majority of participants in formal and non-formal learning reported not receiving any help, from anyone, during their learning process (68%). Those who did receive help needed assistance with the content, transportation or child care. When looking at informal learning, this split becomes 48% to 52% of help and no help respectively. The majority of the help was with the content. The questionnaire did not ask whether those who did not receive help felt no need or experienced problems accessing help.

Finally, a specific examination of the link between gender and participation was conducted to further delve into the numbers reported in Chapter 4 (Table 13, p.145). In this table, a split of 79% female and 21% male was reported for participation in formal learning. A bivariate analysis was conducted and no significant correlation could be found. This is consistent with previous studies where gender differences in access to learning for employees working full-time, in mid-level occupations in large enterprises were not found (Lambert et al., 2009).

5.1.1.4 Summary: State of employee participation in learning activities

In this section, all the key variables collected in the survey were analyzed and compared to the findings commonly reported in the literature. Through this analysis, it was determined that the overall state of employee participation in learning activities at the college shows many parallels with results reported nationally and internationally. According to predictor models, the participation trends were as expected and in general, the group being studied is exhibiting typical participation behaviours in both rates and types of activities. Consistent with previous studies, other learner profile traits such as gender, relationships and learning assistance were not found to have an impact on participation.

### *5.1.2 State of employer learning profile*

Most learning surveys extract information about the employer's learning profile and behaviour from employee surveys such as the one conducted in phase I. However, as explained in Chapter 2, there are limitations to such a practice. For example, assuming the employers' sponsoring profile based on the employees' reporting the level of funding they received can lead to a gross assumption and misrepresent the employee uptake as the employer's offer. It is only recently that this gap has been recognized and that comparisons between employee and employer surveys are being more formally conducted (Lambert et al., 2009). In an effort to mitigate this issue, the study included the collection of artefacts mentioned during the interview phases III to VI of the study. Moreover, the interviewees (n=10) selected for those phases of the research completed the *Learning Performance Index* (LPI) survey. This instrument provided a perception-based overview of the employer's learning profile and behaviour. Results from these

three sources of data (employee learning survey, artefacts and the LPI) are being reported in this section to describe the landscape of employer-sponsored learning at the study site.

5.1.2.1 Rate of employer-sponsorship for learning activities

According to the employees who participated in the employee learning surveys, the rate of employer-sponsored learning is quite substantial. Of the 86 employees who participated in some form of learning, 80 (93%) received some form of employer sponsorship, either in time, funding, or both. This high level of employer support makes it interesting to look at the sponsorship in relations to the type of learning activities being sponsored. In analysing the breakdown of those numbers, it is important to remember that respondents were asked to recall and describe one formal and non-formal learning activity and one informal activity. Therefore the formal/non-formal and the informal categories are not mutually exclusive and the totals reported represent instances of funding, as opposed to actual total number of employees. The focus and analysis interest in this section has emerged as the comparison between the sponsorship of vocational and non-vocational learning.

Among the 86 instances of participation in vocational learning, there were 66 instances of funding received (22 for formal/non-formal learning and 44 for informal learning) (Table 18, p.162). This figure represents a 77% rate of employer sponsorship for vocational learning. In comparison, out of the 39 instances of non-vocational learning, 10 received funding (7 formal/non-formal and 3 informal). This means a 26% rate of funding for non-vocational learning. This could be interpreted as a strong bias toward job-related learning by the employer.

*Table 18. Instances of employer support by type of learning activity*

| Type of learning activity | Formal / Non-Formal learning | | Informal Learning | | Total number of learning instances |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Employer support<br><br>Type of learning activity | YES<br><br>n= | NO<br><br>n= | YES<br><br>n= | NO<br><br>n= | |
| Vocational | 22 | 8 | 44 | 12 | 86 |
| Non-Vocational | 7 | 1 | 3 | 28 | 39 |
| Total number of support intances | 29 | 9 | 47 | 40 | 125 |

This sponsorship profile is very similar to the national averages reported in 1997 (79%) or in 2002 (72%) (McMullan, 2004), and international average (76.7%) (Marquardt et al., 2002). This employer appears to be sponsoring very few informal, non-vocational learning activities. This type of learning appears to be done on the employee's own time and money. Interestingly however, formal non-vocational learning activities do receive funding.

Based on the results of the *Learning Profile Survey*, it is possible to see that the employer support is following the socio-demographic patterns established earlier. Overall, this employer behaviour is aligned with national and international trends discussed in Chapter 2. These findings indicate that the predicted employee and employer learning patterns appear to be replicated in this organization. What the findings do not do, as is typically the case with this type of survey, is shed any light on whether these results represent the employer's learning behaviour or the employees' behaviour. The results of

the *Learning Performance Index* and the examination of several artefacts will likely provide some insight into this question. They are discussed next.

5.1.2.2 Organizational learning performance

The perceived organizational learning performance of the college was measured in order to capture the perception of each interviewee on the organizational predictors of participation in employer-sponsored learning. This additional data is intended to shed more light on whether the participation trends reported in the previous section reflect the employer's behaviour, the employees' or both. The overall scores obtained through this second survey are also useful in further assessing the state of workplace learning at the college. In addition, and similar to the data from the learning profiles, the organizational learning performance data allow a comparison with the organizational trends and with predictors of participation discussed in the literature. Finally, since the respondents (n=10) are the interviewees representing the college, the supervisors and the employees, it also permits a comparison in perception between respondent groups.

The results for the organizational learning performance were obtained by totalling the respondents' scores and interpreting them using the four-level scale created by the Conference Board of Canada:

> *Level 4* (High Level of Performance)
> The organization is a high-performing learning organization. An effective systemic approach that is fully responsive to changing business needs is evident. This is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights. However, continuous improvement and focus will be required to maintain this level of performance.
>
> *Level 3* (Strong Level of Performance)
> The organization is on its way to becoming a high-performing learning organization. A systemic approach is in place that is moderately responsive to both the multiple requirements of a learning organization

> and changing business needs. This is an organization that is well on the way to understanding how to create, acquire, and transfer knowledge and modify its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights.
>
> *Level 2* (Fundamental Level of Performance)
>
> The basic requirements for effective organizational learning are in place, but several key criteria are not addressed. The beginning of a systemic approach to becoming a learning organization may be underway. However, this is an organization that is generally reactive to most aspects of learning and development.
>
> *Level 1* (Basic Level of Performance)
>
> Substantial effort is required to move the organization towards a learning organization. Most of the key requirements are not addressed. No systemic approach is in place for creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge or for modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights.
>
> (Conference Board of Canada, 2006)

The *Learning Performance Index* tool also includes interpretation scales (Appendix 9 et seq., p.318) for each of the organizational learning performance pillars: Vision, Infrastructure, Culture, Learning Dynamics, and Investment. Descriptors for each pillar are included in the results. Table 19 (p.165), provides the results per group of respondents for each organizational learning pillar as well as the overall, organizational learning performance scores.

*Table 19. Organizational learning performance: scores by respondent groups and organizational learning performance pillars*

| Respondent Groups (averaged scores)<br><br>Organizational learning performance pillar | College Representatives (n=3) | Support staff employees interviewed, and union president (n=4) | Supervisors interviewed (n=3) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Vision<br>The extent to which learning is part of the vision of the organization | Level 3 | Level 2 | Level 3 |
| Infrastructure<br>The systems and procedures in place to support learning | Level 3 | Level 1 | Level 2 |
| Culture<br>How the culture in the college supports learning | Level 3 | Level 1 | Level 3 |
| Learning Dynamics<br>The extent to which learning is at the core of how the college operates | Level 3 | Level 1 | Level 3 |
| Investment<br>The extent to which the college invests in learning and development | Level 4 | Level 2 | Level 4 |
| Organizational learning performance, overall score | Level 3 | Level 1 | Level 3 |

According to the interpretation scale presented in the previous pages, of the three overall scores are totalled and then averaged, this organization is at Level 2: Fundamental Level of Performance. This is quite a low score in light of the employee learning participation rates reported in the previous sections. In other words, the employees exhibit a healthy level of participation in learning, yet score the organization the lowest of all groups on the organizational *Learning Performance Index* survey instrument. Moreover, once the scores are analyzed by groups, there is quite a gap between the employees' perception and the college administration and supervisors. It is important to note here that the responses from the union president, who is a full-time support staff employee, were included in the employee respondent group to provide the same level of

confidentiality given to the other respondents. The administration scored the organization at a 'strong level' of performance (Level 3) while the employees gave it the lowest rating with a 'basic level' of performance (Level 1). When taking the point of view that for each respondents, perception is reality, this discrepancy between the employees and the employer's perception of the learning offer is what can lead to the employees not maximizing their uptake of the employer's support. This is also what can lead to the reports being reflective of the uptake but not the offer. A similar discrepancy was reported in the Céreq's combined analysis of the Adult education survey (AES) results and the continuing vocational training survey (CVTS3) (Lambert et al., 2009). For example, in this study 82% of employers reported sharing information about learning yet 62% of employees considered themselves informed. In the case of this study, the specific labour relations context at the time of the survey and the potential, imminent strike could have influenced these scores even further. During a labour dispute, the employer and the employees tend to take opposite views on most topics.

The analysis of the interviews should shed additional light on the matter. At this point, the *Learning Performance Index* survey is practically inconclusive as to whether the research site is a learning organization or not. The most meaningful component of this data set is the lack of consensus and the fact that the division in perception clearly lies between employer and employees.

Similar to the outcome of the study on the Dispositif d'information sur la formation employeur-salarié (DIFES1) (Lambert et al., 2009), the complementary analysis of data from individual employee learning profiles and the organizational learning performance scores from multiple perspectives appears to have produced additional, useful information for explaining the learning behaviours observed in this

organization. In this case, we found that issues of communication and awareness between employers and employees could be at the root of the patterns that have emerged so far. The use of the organizational data, albeit perception-based, seems to better contextualize data obtained from employees only. And, unlike traditional learning surveys, it also begins to resolve the knowledge gap reported in Chapter 1 in regards to the misalignment of the offer versus the uptake and the discrepancy between the employer and the employees' experience (Peters, 2004; Whitney, 2007). The examination of organizational artefacts should further contribute to this approach.

5.1.2.3 Employer data based on artefacts

During the interviews with the representatives of the college, supervisor and employee groups, any mention or reference to documents was followed by a request to obtain a copy of those documents. They became the collection of artefacts reviewed in this section. Although these artefacts were collected as a result of the interviews, their analysis is most relevant and useful in providing additional data on the employer. They are therefore examined here.

*5.1.2.3.1 Human resources policies and procedures*

During the interviews, two policies and procedures were mentioned on several occasions: "Tuition Assistance" and "Performance Reviews". The tuition assistance policy, dated 2005, states that all full-time employees are eligible to apply and receive tuition fee reimbursement upon the successful completion of courses offered as part of a certificate, diploma or degree program at an accredited institution. The amount is set at a lifetime maximum of $5,000 per employee for certificates, diplomas or degrees, and a maximum of $15,000 for graduate and post-graduate studies. The criteria for eligibility

also mention an appropriate alignment with the college's objectives and state that "the courses or program must relate to the work of the employee, to courses or programs, or services offered by the College, or in preparation of potential positions at the College". This is somewhat open-ended and left to interpretation, as most policies. Again, depending on the experiences of employees, if this policy was applied narrowly, it could have led to the perception that the learning culture is inadequate while the college leaders would be under the impression that the policy was quite generous. This is assuming that the policy and the program are well communicated and well known by the employees. In fact, they may not be. Communication has been found to be a key factor in employees' perception and uptake of the offer. The DIFES1 in Europe in fact reported that employees in management seem to be very well informed about the learning offer of their employer, regardless of the communication efforts and methods utilized by the employer to promote learning. However, it was found that for employees in lower-skilled jobs, they would only benefit and be aware of learning opportunities if the employer utilized a very systematic approach to promoting and discussing learning (Sigot & Vero, 2009). This could therefore explain such a big gap in perception between the employer (all management employees) and the support staff. This policy is also directed at formal learning only, which, as has been identified, may not be the preferred method of learning of this group (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006) even though it is the preferred method for employers (Cedefop, 2010).

The performance review form was mentioned because it contains an individual professional/career development form that is to be completed by the employee and the supervisor, at the time of the review. There is no indication regarding how the plan is developed and how the goals and strategies are identified. A copy of this form, signed by

both the employee and the supervisor, is sent to the Professional Development Office. This form is indicative of an organizational system and infrastructure for communicating and supporting the importance of employee learning. However, it is likely that the implementation of this system is once again, where a potential gap in perception could arise between the employees and the employer. A recent literature review on the topic of career conversation found that it is typical for the development discussion to be paired with the annual performance appraisal discussion. It is also common in large, unionized organizations to find that performance conversations only happen sporadically, if at all (Butterfield, Lalande, & Borgen, 2008). Consequently, if the performance review does not happen, then the development discussion will likely not happen. This too could greatly contribute to the gap between the employer and the employees' view on the learning performance of the organization.

###### *5.1.2.3.2 Communication and information*

The potential gap in the systemic approach to communication and dissemination of information regarding learning is particularly important for this group. It therefore became be relevant to examine the weekly announcement sent by the college, via email, every Monday morning. Those were mentioned by at least two interviewees. Monday announcements include a long list of information pieces and updates under key headings: Events this week, Upcoming events, Jobs and opportunities, Announcements. Staff development workshops are listed under 'opportunities' along side discounted tickets for shows and sporting events. Although sent via email, the printed version translated into twelve pages. In the analysis of the interviews, it will be noted that employees are expected to keep up-to-date but that not everyone does. It is also mentioned that groups

of employees do not have easy access to computers, email and internet at work, thereby potentially creating inequality in access to information. On the other hand, the employee satisfaction survey, also part of the artefact collection, indicates that 72% find the weekly update an effective and useful communication tool. This finding is from a much larger sample (60% of all employees) but the composition of the respondent group is not known. Despite being a comprehensive, effective and appreciated form of communication, in light of what we know about the need to approach the dissemination of information about learning in a very systematic manner (Sigot & Vero, 2009), this somewhat passive, all encompassing communication tool may not be sufficient to ensure a proper alignment between the perception of the employer and the employees when it comes to the learning culture of the organization. The information about the learning opportunities is buried and even inaccessible to some.

##### *5.1.2.3.3 Collective agreement*

The collective agreement was mentioned during the interviews to bring attention to two clauses. One stipulates that all employees who are part of this bargaining unit are entitled to three paid professional development days per year. It states "Such leave shall be used to enhance the employee's transferable job skills and can include such activities as attending seminars, participating in College staff development activities, job shadowing, and other legitimate training and education activities" (Ontario Public Service Employees Union, 2005). The other reference made during the interview relates to a clause describing how employees in the bargaining unit "may take for a fee of twenty dollars per course plus the cost of required course materials, on the employee's own time, …. courses which the College currently offers… upon meeting admission requirements".

Similar to the tuition assistance policy, both clauses are fairly open, particularly regarding the definition of the type of training. In fact, it is unclear as to how one defines 'transferable skills' and 'other legitimate activities'. Depending on the application of these clauses, those could also become a potential source of discrepancy in perception.

It is interesting to note that the collective agreement itself includes a clause on tuition reimbursement, stipulating that "employees who successfully complete educational courses with the prior approval of the College, either at the College or another educational setting, will be reimbursed by the College for all or part of the tuition fees by the employee" (p.33). It also includes a clause on the maintenance of salary while attending such courses, during work hours. The connection between the professional development days, if any, is not articulated.

Assuming the employees have some familiarity with the collective agreement, this explicit support for employee learning in the employee contract with the colleges should warrant higher scores in the *Learning Performance Index*. The extent and the method by which policies, procedures and the collective agreement are communicated to employees were not mentioned during the interviews. It is therefore unclear how employees keep up-to-date and informed in those matters. In the interviews, one employee in fact indicated only finding out about the access to continuing education courses at a reduced rate after taking several courses, while speaking to a fellow employee who was in the same course.

*5.1.2.3.4 Investment in employer-sponsored learning*

The information provided by the Head of Professional Development at the college during the interview indicates that the 2008-09 investment in employer-sponsored

learning, including operations, was approximately $875,000. The investment in professional development leaves, which may include both formal and informal learning was approximately $300,000. This represents a total, central investment of $1,175,000. This does not include departmental spending on learning activities. With a total of 1187 full-time employees, including administrators, faculty and support staff, this represents an estimated investment of $990 CAD per employee, per year, or 1.2% of total salaries at the college.

This figure is similar and even higher than international expenditures reported in 2004. In the United States, the average was $852USD per employee, whereas Canada's was sitting at $584USD, compared to the international average of $630USD (including Asia $362USD, Australia/New Zealand $671 USD, China $504USD, Europe $584 USD, Japan $450 USD, Latin America $310 USD, and the Middle East $783 USD) (Marquardt et al., 2002). When these findings are compared to the organizational learning performance scores, it does appear as though the employees interviewed do not perceive the investment as being as adequate as the administration does, despite the investment being somewhat at par with other organizations, if not more generous. It is likely that most employees do not have access or do not review this type of information and can therefore only base their perception on their direct experiences and observations. The head of professional development also added that the college had been voted top 100 employer in Canada and rated exceptional in regards to employee development.

*5.1.2.3.5 Employee survey*

The results of the *Learning Profile Survey* and the *Learning Performance Index* can be further contextualized with the findings of the 2008 employee survey conducted

by the college. A complete analysis of this survey is beyond the scope of this study but since it was mentioned several times in the interviews, the report was deemed an important artefact to include. In a nutshell, the survey, which had a return rate of 60.6%, shows a very high level of satisfaction in all areas investigated: strategic direction/leadership, academic excellence, communication, college environment, work environment, resources, growth and professional development, the jobs, and employee engagement. All areas scored between 65% and 84% of favourable and strongly favourable responses, with professional development sitting at 76% satisfaction. Still, looking at where some of the indicators with the highest level of 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' are, issues of recognition, employee equality in support and accountability, knowledge sharing across departments and conflict resolution stand out somewhat as areas in need of some improvement. The results do not specify whether the responses came from faculty, support staff or administrators, and to what extent each group participated. The support staff dissatisfaction with the employer could have been completely overshadowed by faculty and administrators respondents who, based on their occupation and place in the organization, tend to be more aware of the learning offer (Sigot & Vero, 2009).

#### 5.1.2.4 Summary: Employer Profile

The artefacts analyzed indicate that this college is, generally speaking, a good place to work and there are no evident barriers to employee learning. Most of the situational and institutional predictors of employer-sponsored learning appear to be there: industry sector, size, multi-site, investment, learning activities, vision, and the infrastructure (Ashton, 2004; Bélanger et al., 2004; Conference Board of Canada, 2006;

Glass et al., 2002; Kim et al., 2004; Peters, 2004; Sugrue & Kim, 2004) . However, when scratching under the surface and looking at the employer through the lens of support staff, one key institutional predictor – communication - may in fact be missing and dispositional factors may also be at play (Ajzen, 1991; Billett, 2001; Bratton, 2001; Cedefop, 2010; Conference Board of Canada, 2006; Hurtz, 2002). Those include: relationship, support, learning culture (which includes rewarding and recognizing learning), and the learning dynamics (which involves how the organization operates, solves problems and shares knowledge). The only available results regarding relationships and support during learning are from the *Learning Profile Survey* and are somewhat inconclusive. Positive relationships and support during learning were reported by a number of respondents but there were no clear links to participation type or rate. On the learning culture and learning dynamics though, there are indications from both the *Learning Performance Index* and the employee satisfaction survey that reward and recognition for learning, knowledge sharing and employee involvement in problem solving are indeed weak areas for this organization. These could in turn have an indirect effect on participation in employee learning mainly by affecting the process that precedes participation.

The use of the *Learning Profile Index* proved to be very useful in contrasting the perceptions of the management group and the employee group. The marked difference in score seem very much reflective of a difference between the employer's offer and the employees' uptake perhaps as a result of the lack of organized and systematic communication and process for triggering the conversation about learning. This is a level of diagnostic that is much more precise and potentially useful for the parties involved and interested in increasing and widening participation in learning.

### *5.1.3 Summary: State of participation in employer-sponsored learning activities among college support staff*

This section was designed to establish the state of participation in employer-sponsored learning activities among college support staff at the research site. It included a review of three sets of quantitative data: the results from the *Learning Profile Survey* conducted among support staff employees (n=89), the results the *Learning Performance Index* conducted among the ten interviewees, and the series of artefacts collected during the interviews. The results of the *Learning Profile Survey* showed that in general, the overall learning participation rate is more or less aligned with national and international averages, with the total participation rates being slightly higher at 97% and formal learning also higher at 43%.

In the end, it is possible to state that the employee and employer predictor models applied in a fairly typical manner. Variables such as education and age were, as would have been expected, shown to be significant predictors of participation in formal learning. With the exception of the union presence which has been found to normally curb employee participation in vocational learning (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004), the situational and institutional predictors for both formal and informal learning materialized and made the general participation behaviour of the employees at this college largely predictable. Other variables, such as gender, were not found to be correlated to participation, a finding that is also consistent with previous studies. On the employer's side, the artefacts confirmed the presence of situational and institutional predictors favourable to employee learning. Based on those models, the results of the *Learning Profile Survey* and the *Learning Performance Index* were also predictable, with the

exception of the employee group (n=4) responses to the *Learning Performance Index*. This group's score were much lower and less complimentary to the college than the scores from the supervisors and the employer group. The employee group is very small however and also represents a group of employees with atypical learning participation behaviours. Nevertheless, that consistent finding among the four respondents raised some flags which were linked back to some of the notable findings. Those include the tendency for support staff employees to rely heavily on informal learning for their vocational development and potential gaps in regards to communication, recognition and perception of the employer's learning offer. These may be all interconnected aspects of one central issue or interrelated issues that influence one another into a domino effect. This compounding situation is also consistent with previous studies. The next section will review the data that documents the antecedents to employee participation in learning activities. It will likely help determine if and how these issues may be related and continue to enlighten the research questions posed in the first chapter.

## 5.2 The antecedents to participation in employer-sponsored learning: Interview Results

The interview results were analyzed to examine four components of the antecedents to participation in employer-sponsored learning activities, as per the research questions: How was the learning demand expressed? How is the learning demand expected to be expressed? What are the perceived and the expected roles played by each party in expressing demand? And, what are the factors that facilitated or inhibited the expression of demand? These research questions and the corresponding theoretical

framework adopted for the study provided the initial categories for reporting and analysing the findings from the interviews.

As mentioned in the methodology section, upon an initial test of the codebook, it also became clear that decision-making, in the context of this study, is a distinctive step separating expression of demand and participation in a learning activity. It was therefore added to the coding template. Moreover, where statements were selected to be used as verbatim, a unique identifier code was attributed to each one. This code identifies the source and traces the actual statement in the database. For example, [Ee1Ref2] indicates that the interviewee who provided the comment is an employee and the statement is the second reference retained from this interviewee. College interviewees (college president, head of human resources, head of professional development and president of the union) are therefore Col1, Col2, Col3, or Col4, but not necessarily in that order to preserve anonymity. Supervisors are Sr1, Sr2, or Sr3. Employees (support staff employees interviewed) are Ee1, Ee2, or Ee3.

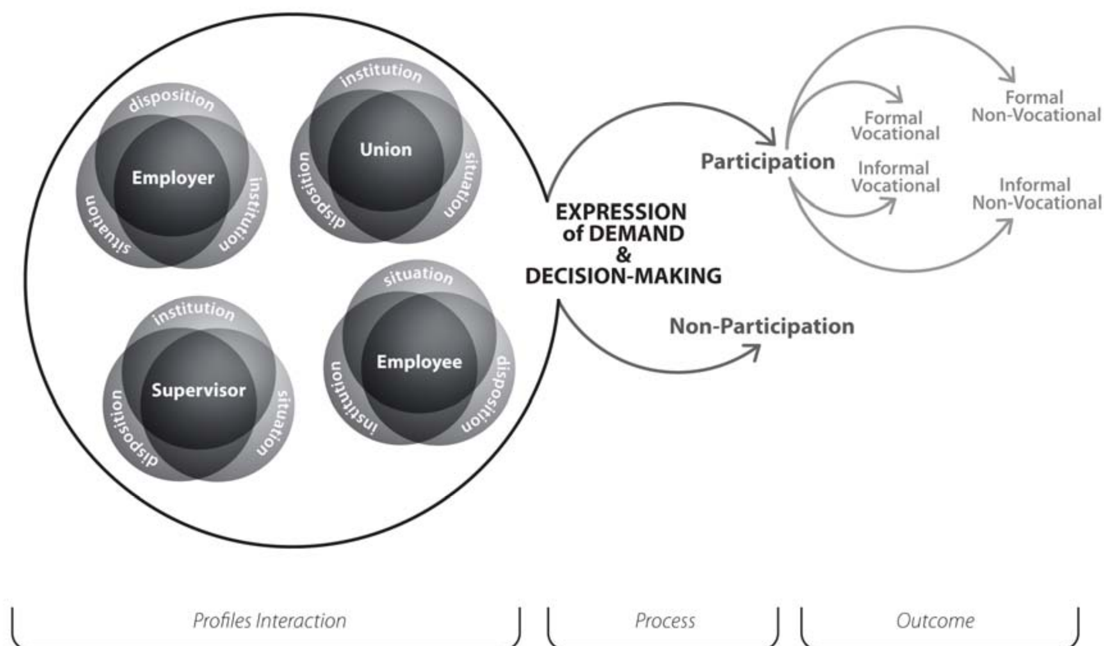


*Figure 6. Revised theoretical framework separating expression of demand and decision-making*

Consequently, this section is first and foremost organized by the categories established a priori (Table 11, p.142). It also reflects an adjusted theoretical framework which now shows decision-making as its own distinctive step (Figure 6, p.178). The emergent themes are embedded throughout this section and are also synthesized in the discussion section.

### *5.2.1 Expression of demand for learning and decision-making: Current state*

It was established in Chapter 2 that expressing demand for learning consists of a process during which a person, a group or an organization examine their situation, set an objective, become aware of a gap which can be filled by training, and then articulates a demand for learning in order to meet the set objective (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation,

2006). This process is also recognized as a decision-making process (Bélanger & Voyer, 2004). Consequently, the analysis of the interview data went beyond the articulation of the demand for learning, as suggested by the definition above. The analysis framework actually included the moment in time between the expression of demand and the participation or non-participation outcome. As a result, specific components related to making the final decision about participation, once the learning demand had been articulated are part of the results analyzed to document the current state. The series of steps associated with expressing demand for learning represents a fluid and non-linear process. But, for the purpose of this study, it is being deconstructed and artificially separated in discrete sections on a continuum:

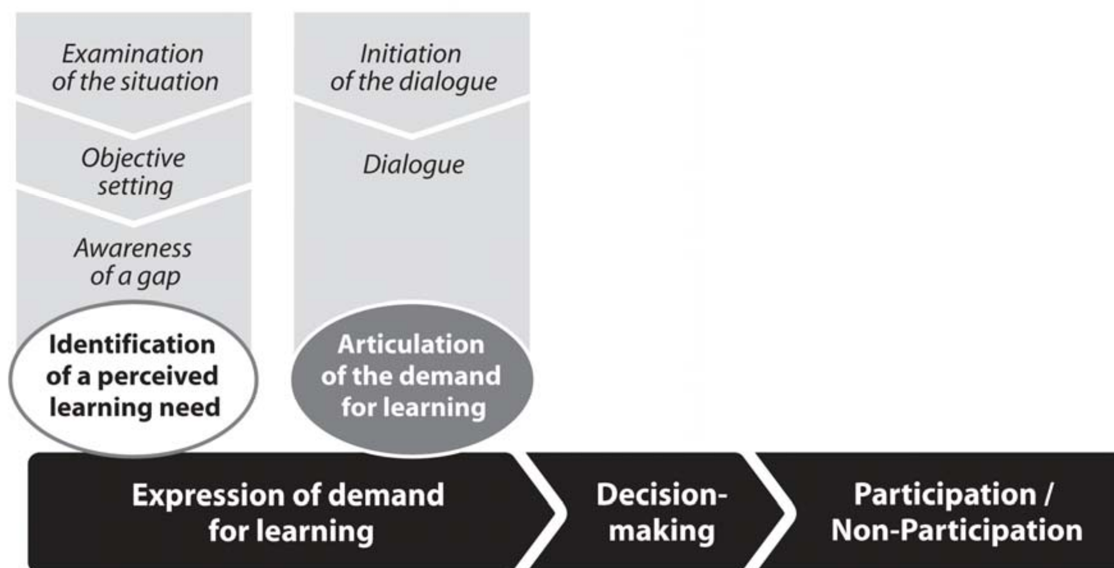


*Figure 7. The process of expressing demand for learning and making a decision about participation: Identification of a perceived learning need*

This framework will provide the basis for reporting on the interview data analysis and discussing the key findings.

5.2.1.1 Identifying perceived learning needs

The identification of perceived learning needs is the first step in the expression of demand for learning. The term 'perceived', which will be implied hereon forth, is used because of the inevitable subjectivity embedded in the process (Maragnani & Poussou, 2010; Roegiers et al., 1992). As presented in Figure 7 (p.179), identifying learning needs consists of examining a situation, setting an objective and becoming aware of a gap between the situation and the objective. Depending on who is becoming aware of the gap, the assessment is typically based on the perception of whoever is examining the situation. The four groups represented in the interviews, the employer (the college representatives), the union, the supervisors and the employees, each reported having identified learning needs in the past twelve months. In addition, the interviewees reported that occasionally there were external parties such as government or regulatory bodies involved in identifying learning needs. From there, two scenarios emerged. One where the employer, the union, the supervisors and the external regulatory party identified the learning needs of employees, on their behalf. The other consists of employees identifying learning needs for themselves.

*5.2.1.1.1 Emerging theme: others identifying learning needs on behalf of employees*

There are potentially four groups who are in a position to identify learning needs on behalf of employees: the employer, the union, the supervisors and external regulatory bodies. The employer reported three types of situations when it identified learning needs. One involves observing and interpreting information they receive from employees or

from other departments. For example, the employer may use the results of the employee survey to interpret gaps in certain behaviours and translate those into learning needs. Or, it may hear from departments who are hearing about problems encountered by employees in the college:

> The Human Rights office (at the college) was getting a huge number of complaints from people. They were not complaints, they were getting a huge number of phone calls saying I'm in conflict; I don't know how to deal with it. [Col3Ref2]

In this case, it could be argued that it is the employees who called the Human Rights office who became aware of a gap. However, it was the employer that responded by identifying there was a learning need. The employees, according to the quote, were not suggesting learning as a solution per se.

The other situation was one where the senior team and a cross-functional team, upon having developed a new academic strategy for the institution, identified the need to ensure everyone understood the new strategy and the need to engage everyone in the implementation process. This was presented as a learning and development opportunity for leaders at the college.

The third situation relates to learning needs that appear to be based on past experiences, where problems emerged due to a lack of training. As a result, the employer has identified learning needs for new employees as a preventative measure:

> …for faculty, their jobs at the beginning can be so overwhelming that unless we make certain things mandatory, they don't, they just don't participate because they are overwhelmed and then they get themselves into huge trouble. But that's probably the only group. [Col3Ref3]

The external, regulatory bodies that mandate learning to the organization probably fall in this category as well. Typically, and according to the respondents, they have identified learning needs through some form of general assessment, likely outside the

college, but are mandating organization-wide learning as prevention or as a way to establish a minimum standard. For example, this would be true of the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) training for specific jobs, a learning need identified by government. This category also applies to the learning need identified through the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, which mandates the employer to conduct customer service training for all staff, by a specific deadline, in response to new legislation.

Supervisors are also in a position to identify learning needs and they reported doing so during the interviews. In one case, it was the result of a significant change in a computer operating system which required all employees to learn the components of the software that related to their job. Although the process was collaborative and involved a cross-functional team to select the new software, in the end, the learning needs identified were based on everyone's job description and the supervisor had final say as to who needed to learn what. Still, it is worth noting that in this particular case, employees were also invited to identify areas of the software they may be interested in learning, beyond what was needed for this job. It could therefore be argued that this situation was a hybrid of both scenarios: learning needs identified by others and by the employees. Supervisors also identify learning needs at the time of the annual performance review process and at any time during the year if a gap in performance has been observed or recorded. Supervisors mentioned that they used their own observations or feedback reported by students (e.g. complaints sent to the manager by email), or other employees. These all appeared to be fairly anecdotal and no one reported using any kind of assessment or evaluation tool for identifying individual learning needs for their employees. However, one interviewee from the college (employer) group mentioned that occasionally,

managers will review data from the employee surveys and determine that their department did not score well in one area relative to other departments at the college. The manager may, as a result, identify that there is a departmental learning need and mandate or recommend a training session for all staff. This was the only example of a measurement being utilized as a tool to identify learning needs. The union reported having responded to learning needs they had identified (project management, computer software), but the method for identifying the need was not mentioned.

Having multiple parties informally identifying the perceived learning needs of employees has been reported in studies conducted in Quebec (Bélanger & Robitaille, 2008) and in France (Lambert et al., 2009). In these studies, there was a marked difference in the formalization of the process for expressing according to the occupation and hierarchy in the organization. The farther from management and the lower-skilled, the more informal and driven by others the process was. This seems to be the experience of the employees interviewed as part of this research.

##### *5.2.1.1.2 Emerging theme: employees identifying their learning needs*

When others are not identifying needs for employees, the most common scenario reported during the interviews is one where employees identify their own learning needs:

> It's mostly the staff who are sensing that they don't have the skills to deal with a particular issue. [Col3Ref1]

To do so, interviewees reported examples such as the conversation with the supervisor at the time of the performance review meeting, using the form as a catalyst. This form includes a chart with the following headings:

Professional Career Development Training Goals

Is goal for Current Position or Career Development/Advancement?

Strategies

Resources Required

Consult with Staff Development Required?

Target Date

Date Approved

In Progress

Date Completed

Indirectly, this form triggers the employee and, or the supervisor to think about "Career Development Training Goals" and to think about learning needs for their current position or for a future position. According to a recent literature review, the use of the performance appraisal form to trigger the career and, or the identification of learning needs is most common in the workplace (Butterfield et al., 2008). The first two headings on the form can facilitate and trigger the three-part process for the identification of a perceived learning need described in Figure 7 (p.179): examination of the situation, objective-setting, and awareness of gap. However, the way the objectives are identified, and thus the way in which the employees become aware of gaps are not explicit. No systematic method for doing so was mentioned by the employees. Instead, the three interviewees from the employee group talked about examples of identifying learning needs on their own, as a result of a reflection process. Two of the three did not mention this process and the resulting learning need to their supervisor during the performance review process. This aspect will be explored in more detail when discussing the articulation of the learning demand.

For this section, suffice to say that the three participants shared experiences that are in line with the decisional process described in the literature, wherein the following catalysts for identifying a learning need have been observed: a life or professional change, an impulsion based on a role model of success, external, persistent pressure (e.g. family), the maturing of an idea, or the pragmatic calculation of costs and benefits (Bélanger & Voyer, 2004). The three employees interviewed reported a combination of these catalysts. But the maturing of an idea – in fact a dream – was common to all three:

> …all of my education post secondary was not at the university level, and so I was getting more and more curious as to whether or not I could actually hack it at this level. [Ee1Ref1]

> I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up and I think I may have found it now, I am hoping. …it may be something I do long term; but before I die, I am going to have that degree. [Ee2Ref1]

> It was always my desire to have my degree." "I always wanted to realize my dream. I was ready, I was ready; it was the right time. [Ee3Ref1]

The identification process was also based on examining their current work situation, identifying an interest in a future job and becoming aware of a skills or qualification gap:

> I realized that if I wanted to look at any type of full time teaching or full time faculty, there was no way that they were able to hire me because all of their faculty require a minimum of an undergrad. [Ee1Ref2]

> I thought, I can do this quite easily and I was looking because I was unhappy in my current job and I was looking for something and I just thought, you know what, I think this is a fit. [Ee2Ref2]

> Plus too, having been in the college for over eight years I noticed that, there were opportunities that came, I had the skills but and the experience but for some reason, because I never had the qualifications, that was a set back. [Ee3Ref2]

The influence of family was also expressed strongly in identifying a learning need:

> And then my youngest sister actually ended up being the one who went and got her MA and I have that legacy. She and I are a lot mirrored, on different tracks but the same way. Often it has been kind of weird. [Ee2Ref3]

> ...because I'm the only child who doesn't have one. … but I am the oldest, but all of my (three) siblings, they have their masters; my brother is studying for his PhD, I was the only who never really made it beyond college…[Ee3Ref3]

> The funny thing is my daughter is in third year university now, so I went to her and said "do you think I can handle it?" from the horse's mouth. She said "oh yes, no problem go ahead." She was very encouraging. …That was an extra encouragement that she was having a good experience, so I felt that I might. [Ee1Ref3]

These examples demonstrate how the steps described by the respondents are consistent with the theoretical model established in the literature. The elements that support, frame and guide this step-by-step process will be examined next.

*5.2.1.1.3 Emerging theme: the process of identifying needs is informal*

The process of identifying learning needs, based on the examples provided by the interviewees, comes across as somewhat informal. In all cases, there is some form of interpretation of data or information: data from the employee survey, data from performance review documents, and anecdotal data based on observing trends and peaks in phone calls and 'complaints'. There was no mention of any individual or organizational performance metric used to identify individual or organizational learning needs. Other than the regulatory training and the few occasions where learning is offered

to pre-empt or address specific problems (Figure 10, p.193), for the most part, the employer appears to be relying heavily on staff identifying their own learning needs.

This is potentially all well and good as long as employees have the ability to identify their learning needs. An example of this is the conflict resolution and communication workshops that were discussed by several of the interviewees. According to three of the interviewees, the workshops came about as a result of what the Human Resources, Professional Development and other departments were hearing and observing:

> So we would hear from staff that they didn't feel they were well enough equipped to deal with students who were giving them a hard time or, had those kinds of attitudes, and we also heard from the staff that they were a bit intimidated – some of them by their managers, some of them got in conflict with their managers, with colleagues, and they didn't know what to do. [Col3Ref4]

As a result, Human Resources, Professional Development and the human rights office decided to develop a series of programs to build the college's capacity for dealing with people of different / diverse groups, in all senses. What is not evident in this process is the methodology for interpreting the staff's situation, comparing it to an objective and becoming aware of a gap. Was there a process to determine whether the problem identified by staff was a learning need for staff? Perhaps it was but none of the three interviewees mentioned the method by which they arrived at that conclusion. The interview protocol did not specifically address issues of process for analyzing and assessing learning needs. The omission on the part of the interviewee may perhaps indicate that this part of the process is very informal.

This point also highlights the importance of the questions posed to staff as a way to help the staff and the employer identify learning needs. For example, there are two reported instances of the employer or the supervisor asking the employee directly to

identify their learning need: performance review form with prompting headers (see p.135) and the departmental luncheon meetings. During the luncheon meetings "staff are asked to identify their repeating training needs" [Col3Ref5].

These two methods make huge assumptions about an employee's ability and, or willingness to identify their learning needs. Chapter 2 introduced the notion that a learning need may or may not be identified. The self-assessment of learning needs requires skills and tools as well as processes for measurement and feedback (Asadoorian & Batty, 2005; Roegiers et al., 1992). Moreover, it was established too that when it comes to identifying learning needs in the workplace, employees are not in an equal relationship with their supervisor or with the employer and this can affect their ability or willingness to identify learning needs (Cedefop, 2003). It will therefore be important to keep these limitations in mind as we review the process by which learning needs are articulated as a learning demand.

##### *5.2.1.1.4 Summary: identifying perceived learning needs in the current state*

In this section we established that, for the most part, the process of identifying learning needs is informal. The needs are most often identified by the employees themselves, usually upon being asked by the employer, the supervisor or sometimes the union. There are times when it is the others who identify the learning needs of employees. Others include the employer, the supervisors or external regulatory bodies. The methodology, tools and consequently the evidence or information used to identify a learning need is also informal. When the employers and the supervisors identify a need it tends to be in reaction to anecdotal gaps in capability or to assist in the implementation of a new strategy or a new system. Similarly, employees tend to self-assess their own needs

in response to new work or work systems, or in responses to problems they encountered in their work. In the instances where measurement or evidence are utilized there is also a high level of informality in linking the evidence with specific learning needs. No specific diagnostic process or assessment tools were mentioned. All of these findings are consistent with the findings reported in similar studies. For example, Stalker (1993) had deconstructed the myth on voluntary participation in learning and had developed the model delineating between learning needs that were "other-determined" and "self-determined". More recently the lack of formality in the assessment of learning needs was reported in Quebec, in Canada and in Europe (Bélanger & Robitaille, 2008; Butterfield et al., 2008; Cedefop, 2010).

5.2.1.2 Articulating the learning demand

Articulating the learning demand typically follows the identification of a learning need, and is part of the process of expressing demand for learning. This step involves initiating a dialogue and having a dialogue in order to articulate the demand.

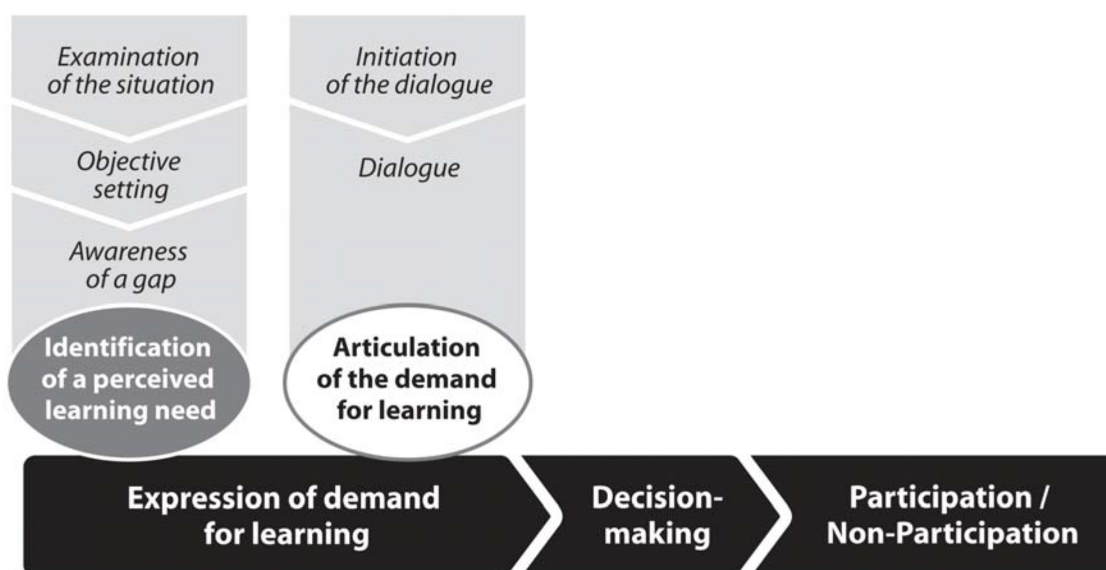

*Figure 8. The process of expressing demand for learning and making a decision about participation: Articulating the demand for learning*

At the research site, articulating the learning demand is an on-going process involving whoever may have become aware of a gap or is attempting to prevent a gap from happening. "There is dialogue that happens in a lot of forms around the college" reported one respondent. This is therefore very similar to the process of identifying learning needs. In fact, two types of scenarios surfaced again: learning demand articulated by the employees to others and learning demand articulated by others to the employees.

*5.2.1.2.1 Emerging theme: learning demand articulated by the employees*

The scenario wherein the learning demand is articulated by the employees can take many formats. Sometimes it is employees speaking to the employer (Human Resources or the Professional Development department) directly and informally about a recurring situation or problem they are facing (e.g. dealing with a diverse student population, struggling with attitudes, intimidation). This can be hallway conversations, employees dropping in the Professional Development office, or during college-wide events organized by the Professional Development department (ball games) or by the union (dances). Other times, the Human Resources department hears from managers through the performance review form because the employee requested training during the performance discussion. The learning demand was therefore mentioned on the form in response to the headings introduced earlier. The responses are then sent to Human Resources and the Professional Development departments. Employees will at times speak to the union and in turn the union speaks to the employer about learning demands. As

mentioned earlier, the Professional Development department also seeks out employee input directly, in a systematic fashion, through informal dialogue and exchanges. Employees from the Professional Development team take about a year to rotate through the departments and hold luncheons during which employees are specifically asked to articulate their learning demand, assuming they have identified learning needs to begin with. All those various observations and input sources are reviewed and bundled in training opportunities on key topics such as communication, conflict resolution, project management, or computer software skills. The articulation process, in these scenarios, is done by the employee. However, it may have been initiated by the employer or the supervisor.

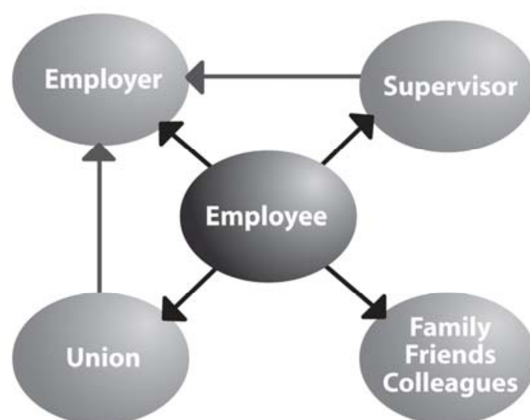


*Figure 9. The articulation of the learning demand by employees to others*

Employees also reported expressing their learning demand to their friends, family or colleagues in relation to the learning needs they identified, mainly as way to get feedback. In some cases, this is done at the exclusion of all other parties. Figure 9 (p.191) illustrates how each party is involved in this scenario, wherein employees articulate their learning needs to others.

Although these findings are consistent with findings in the literature (Butterfield et al., 2008), the risks and pitfalls associated with this employee-driven approach are also emerging in the field of workplace learning and adult education. For example, the conflict between the employee's identity as a worker and as a learner, both relating to the same person – the supervisor - does not always lend itself to the employee articulating a learning demand, particularly not to their supervisor (Hughes, 2004). The tendency to speak to a more remote third party such as Human Resources, the union or very often friends and family is therefore not surprising.

*5.2.1.2.2 Emerging theme: learning demand articulated by others*

In the second scenario, the learning demand is articulated to the employees by others: an external regulatory body, the employer or the supervisor. This scenario also happens via many varied routes. In the case of the performance review process and form, a manager may suggest an area for development (e.g. you could improve your Excel skills) or make a specific recommendation (e.g. you must learn the new software system). The supervisors will also occasionally articulate a departmental learning demand to the Professional Development office or to an external provider (for technical training) and request assistance to deliver it to the employees. The supervisor then lets the employees know by either suggesting or mandating attendance. Finally, it is important to note that there were no instances reported whereby the union articulated a learning demand to the employees directly. The union may offer learning activities to the employees in response to a demand articulated to the union by the employees. However, the union does not appear to be involved in the process of articulating a learning demand to the employees directly. There were instances reported where the union articulated a learning demand on behalf of the employees, to the employer. However, Figure 10 (p.193) shows how there

were no reported instances of the union articulating a learning demand directly to the employees.

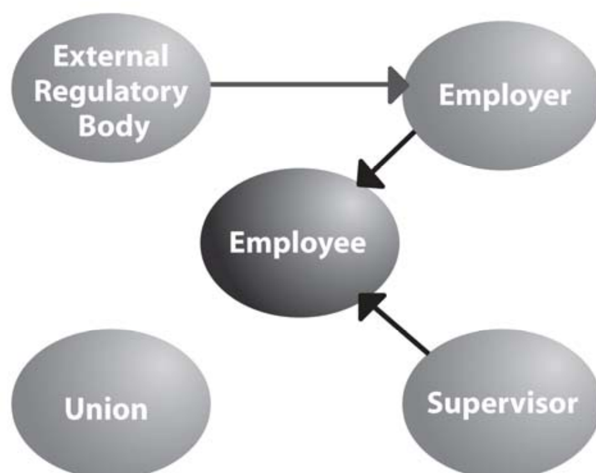


*Figure 10. Others articulating learning demands to employee*

In the case of the employer articulating the learning demand, it typically does so via its hiring and probationary policies, job descriptions or memos issued by the college. Those demands tend to be implemented locally by the supervisors. This scenario is common (Bélanger & Robitaille, 2008; Cedefop, 2010) and does not pose major issues, except for the fact that it does not always maximize the employees' learning if there is no ownership of the need (Knowles, 1990) or if this imposition is perceived as benefiting the employer only (Forrester, 2002). This approach also tends to favour new employees and management, two groups for whom the expectations and the incentives on performance requirements are made much clearer and overtly discussed (Sigot & Vero, 2009).

*5.2.1.2.3 Emerging theme: Exclusion of the supervisor in the dialogue*

When analysing the two typical scenarios for articulating a learning need, one where the employee is told and the other where the employee tells, it is interesting to note that there are instances where the employer and the employees have a direct dialogue, and in some way by-pass the supervisor. Yet, there was no mention of the employer speaking directly to the managers to hear about what their staff need. It is also unclear why the employer considers it necessary to invest time and energy in organizing events such as the luncheon meetings to ask employees about their learning needs when it should, technically, be receiving all the information via the performance review forms submitted by the supervisors. In the interviews, two possible reasons emerged. One respondent spoke about the implicit acknowledgement that employees may not be in a position to speak to their supervisor openly:

> I think there needs to be a discussion amongst employees and managers about people’s development. What do you want to be doing? The bigger problem is that in order to have that you have to be comfortable with somebody. Therein lies the biggest problem because for the most part I would say sixty percent to seventy percent of staff don’t feel comfortable having these discussions. [Col1Ref1]

This could also explain why the employees feel compelled to speak to people other than their supervisor. The issue of employee-supervisor trust and identity, as a pre-requisite for the learning or career conversation, has been well-documented in the literature (Butterfield et al., 2008; Hughes, 2004). This is probably why the Professional Development department goes to great lengths to cultivate neutral relationships and create forums for employees to express their learning demands:

> Because of the nature of the staff who work here [pd department] they’re very neutral, they’re very easy to talk to - people open up. I mean, we spend a lot of time cultivating that…Union dances…baseball tournaments. I mean I personally spent a lot of time meeting people trying

> to make them comfortable talking to me and so I would hear things. [Col3Ref5]

There is also the fact that the respondents said performance reviews do not happen consistently and regularly. This situation has often been reported in organizations of all sizes (Lambert et al., 2009). It is therefore not a fully reliable source of data for the employer. Having said that, it may be wise for the employer to determine why performance reviews do not happen and the reasons supervisors and employees miss out on an important opportunity for dialogue. It would also be useful to determine if the employees by-pass their supervisor when they speak to other departments directly or if this is in addition to speaking to the supervisor. Moreover, the extent to which the Professional Development department informs the supervisors on what they are hearing from employees is not clear either. Yet, as the next section will show, the supervisor is most often the decision-maker in the final stages preceding participation. The exclusion of the supervisor during the expression of demand may therefore pose a problem.

###### *5.2.1.2.4 Summary: articulating the demand in the current state*

Overall the section on articulating the learning demand in the current state showed that the process is closely related to identifying the learning needs. Sometimes the demand is articulated to the employees, by the employer or the supervisor but most of the time it is employees articulating their learning demands to the employer, supervisors, the union, and even friends, family and colleagues. Relying on the employees to articulate their learning demand has risks and implications for the employer. The interviewees are atypical learners who exhibited an ability and willingness to identify a learning need and articulate a learning demand. This supposes that typical non-participants may not be able

or willing to do so. This is particularly true and important in light of how the issues of trust, identity and asymmetrical power documented in the literature (Bratton, 2001; Hughes, 2004) began to materialize for this group. Those issues perhaps explain why the employees favour other stakeholders, particularly friends and family to engage in a dialogue about their learning demand. Potential problems surrounding the fact that, as a result, the supervisors appear to sometimes be excluded from the process of articulating the learning demand also emerged.

#### 5.2.1.3 Making a decision about participation in learning

When analysing the interviews, two key components to making a decision about participation in a learning activity emerged: who has the authority to make the decision and the criteria or methodology used by the decision-maker to make the decision. As mentioned earlier, the process preceding participation in a learning activity has been artificially deconstructed for the sake of this study and the discussion. As can be expected the process of identifying a learning need, articulating a demand and making a decision to participate can happen all at once. Separating the steps may seem like splitting hairs. Moreover, it could be argued that identifying learning needs and articulating a learning demand are in essence, decisions as well. That is true but during those two steps, the decision per se is an element of a step, not the actual focus. In this section, we refer to the decisions that take place after the learning demand has been expressed and before participation occurs. As simple as this moment may have initially appeared from a temporal perspective on the continuum, it became quite clear throughout the interviews that this is probably the most subjective component of all and potentially the most contentious. This is likely because this is the place in the process where the asymmetrical

relationships become most obvious and where decisions can be used to communicate specific messages between the parties involved (Bratton, 2001). This section focuses on the process and it will at times overlap with the discussion on roles. However, the concept of roles will be treated separately and in more depth, in a later section.

###### *5.2.1.3.1 Emerging theme: authority to make the decision*

Similar to the other steps in the process, the decision-making step comes in a multitude of scenarios. The decision-tree depicted in Figure 11 (p.198) represents the scenarios discussed during the interviews. These scenarios show how the decision-making process changes based on the type of learning activity (e.g. mandatory Vs voluntary) and the type of employer-sponsorship involved (e.g. time, time and money, money only, neither time nor money). For example, there are only three scenarios where the employees have final say in the decision. The most obvious is when employees choose to participate in a learning activity during their own time, using their own funds.

| Type of employer sponsorship for the learning activity | Decision-maker: Initial decision to provide learning | Decision for employee to attend | Approval – Final decision to attend | Overturning the final decision after employee appeal |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| At workplace; During work hours; Funded by department or college | *Supervisor* | *Employee* | *n/a* | *n/a* |
| | | | *Optional Learning* | *n/a* |
| | | *Supervisor* | *n/a* | *n/a* |
| | | | *Mandatory* | *n/a* |
| | *Employer* | *Employee (optional learning)* | *Supervisor* | *Employer* |
| | | | | *Union* |
| | | | | *Supervisor's Supervisor* |
| | | *Supervisor (invitation)* | *Employee* | *n/a* |
| | | *Employer* | *n/a* | *n/a* |
| | | | *Mandatory* | *n/a* |
| Outside workplace; During work hours; Funding required from employer (fee, travel or both) | *External provider* | *Supervisor* | *n/a* | *n/a* |
| | | *Employee* | *Supervisor* | *Employer* |
| | | | | *Union* |
| | | | | *Supervisor's Supervisor* |
| | *Employer* | *Employee* | *Supervisor* | *Employer* |
| | | | | *Union* |
| | | | | *Supervisor's Supervisor* |
| Outside workplace; Not during work hours; Funding required from employer | *External provider* | *Employee* | *Supervisor* | *Employer* |
| | | | | *Union* |
| | | | | *Supervisor's Supervisor* |
| | | | *Employer* | *Union* |
| Outside workplace; Not during work hours; No funding required from employer | *External provider* | *Employee* | *n/a* | *n/a* |

*Figure 11. Decision-tree and decision-makers determining participation in learning activities*

The *Learning Profile Survey* showed that this is true of 31% of employees and some of those employees tend to participate in other types of employer-sponsored learning as well. The other two scenarios are when the employer or the supervisors invites, suggests, encourages an employee to attend an optional, voluntary learning activity and the employee chooses not to attend. This may be a particularly strong way for an employee to send a message when a supervisor sets up a learning session for the department and an employee calls in sick. This has been interpreted by one supervisor as the employee deciding not to attend.

Then there are the cases wherein the employer organizes a learning opportunity, the supervisor forwards the memo or the invitation to either all staff or specific employees as way to encourage and recommend participation, yet the employee decides not to participate. The supervisors who experienced this kind of situation did not feel they had much recourse.

> There are some staff who will participate, always want to go but there are some who don't go to anything. Even if you encourage them, "you really should go and do this Professional Development session" or whatever, they hardly want to go to anything. Even when we have more Professional Development days there are some people who just call in sick. What do you do? [Sr3Ref1]

Yet, there is some recognition that perhaps those who are not interested should not be forced to participate:

> I think continuous learning is important but I also understand that it's not important to everybody. I sometimes feel that some people are pushed into continuous learning and they're perfectly happy right where there at, it's a double edged sword in that way. [Ee1Ref4]

But then, another recurring theme, mentioned in some form by all interviewees when speaking about voluntary learning activities:

> It also means that sometimes the people who need it most don't go. [Col2Ref1]

Of course the non-participants were not represented in the interview groups and in fact, they were also a minority in the survey respondent group. This is an inevitable and common outcome based on the topic of the study. However, this is why the study focused on atypical participants, as an attempt to understand further what is behind the non-participation behaviour observed by this group of interviewees.

At this point in the data, suffice to say that as far as the final decision is concerned, the rest of the decision-tree is as can be expected in a hierarchical organization, particularly for mandatory training areas. All interviewees were in agreement that if there is release time involved, then the supervisor has final say. Consequently, the supervisor plays a key role in the majority of the decisions when it comes to participation in employer-sponsored learning. But, as quoted earlier, even having the authority to make the final decision may not mean a final decision (e.g. employee calls in sick). Moreover, employees and the employer group reported instances when the supervisor's decision was challenged, questioned and overturned. But in all cases, it needed the employee to take the initiative to go to Human Resources, the Union, or the supervisor's supervisor. Unfortunately, there are instances when employees do get turned down by their supervisor but do not challenge the decision. They give up on future workshops instead. Very similar scenarios were documented in Hughes' (2004) study of the supervisor's influence on workplace learning.

Some employees and one of the college representatives (employer) also expressed frustration in regards to the selection of participants, particularly for oversubscribed sessions. Interviewees mentioned that the criteria became seniority rather than need, and that seemed inappropriate to the respondents. This inequality of access and perceived

inappropriate criteria has also been reported in comprehensive studies representing hundreds of interviews with employees (Lambert et al., 2009).

*5.2.1.3.2 Emerging theme: decision criteria*

After reviewing the authority for decision-making, it became interesting to examine the criteria for making decisions.

*Table 20. Criterion utilized by each decision-maker for determining employee participation in a learning activity*

| **Approval – Final decision to attend** | **Type of learning approved** | | | **Use of 3 PD Days Coll. Agr.** | **Criteria for final decision (mentioned by interviewees)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Employer** | Mandatory | Onsite | Work hours | No | Regulatory or policy-based decision. |
| | Optional | Offsite | Personal time | No | Alignment with college direction, current or future job; May or may not be job related; Availability of funding; Guidelines and policies; There are exceptions. |
| **Supervisor** | Mandatory | Onsite | Work hours | No | Regulatory requirements;<br>Essential technical skills for job;<br>Based on job description. |
| | | Offsite | Personal time | No | |
| | Optional | Onsite | Work hours | No | Skills relevant to employee's work;<br>Schedule and workload permitting;<br>Employee merit;<br>Employee rotation;<br>Seniority;<br>Availability of funding in the budget to replace employee and pay for fee / travel where applicable. |
| | | Offsite | Work hours | Yes | |
| | | | Personal time | No | |
| **Employee** | Mandatory | Not applicable (N/A) | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| | Optional | Onsite/ depart. | Work hours | No | Interest in new skills;<br>Networking with colleagues;<br>Problem solving;<br>Perceived as requirement / mandatory;<br>Perceived value. |
| | | Offsite | Personal time | No | Advancement possibilities;<br>Requirement for future job interest;<br>Interest. Realization of a personal goal; Time/money available. |

When looking at this table, the criteria appear very clear and the chart gives the illusion of a very simple system. However, the application of the criteria, particularly the criterion about whether the learning is relevant or aligned with job, current of future, is where the grey areas were exposed.

In fact, the area of most disagreement, confusion and ambiguity is in determining whether the employer should sponsor learning related to a future job interest and, or related to personal growth and how it should define these terms. Some refer to this kind of learning as professional development. Some employees are under the impression that the employer only funds 'training', or in other words, vocational learning but not professional development. One interviewee explained that this is why she rated the college low on the *Learning Performance Index*. Being an institution of learning, this employee believes that all learning should be supported:

> Now I disagree with that. I think that the basket weaving course could give them the time and everything to develop a skill that, next thing, they could be teaching that at Continuing Education for your basket weaving class. You don't know where that kind of stuff will lead people to. There are so many variables that could happen to that person. What they offer at the College, they offer. You offer it because you think it is viable for somebody. You are talking about development; you are not talking about training. To me, the two are just different things and I don't think the College has that clearly defined in its policies and procedures. I think in their minds they offer and support training, they don't support PD. They label it PD but half the time, I do not think they mean PD, they mean training. So it is job-related training. [Ee2Ref5]

This is an interesting contrast to the response by one of the employer representatives:

> We actually support all sorts of non job-related learning because of our policy around continuing education. Any employee can take any

> course, Con. Ed. course for twenty dollars, so if you want to go and study cooking or jewelry making or salsa dancing, you can do it for twenty dollars. That's a pretty good encouragement to me for supporting learning. And it's the same with our education tuition reimbursement policy. We have a very generous one, so we're supporting a lot of employees to go and finish either their Bachelors or Masters or PhD. In many cases that is job-related, but one of our ██ manager's is now doing her Masters in ████ ████████ ██ higher education which again, one could argue isn't necessarily directly related to the ████████████ ████ job that she does within ██, but it's a developmental opportunity for her so no doubt if she understands the academic or higher education in a different way that will assist her in her job but it's not a direct correlation, and yet we're supporting that. [Col3Ref1]

In further contrast to the above statement, one employee reports the following incident:

> And I was told, "Yes," in the job interview and then, the first thing I do is, I want to put in to get some support but I'm told, "No," it's not related to my job so they backtracked … they support it if they think it is tied to the current position you are doing, not if it's a future one, not if it's not tied specifically to what you are doing. Then they don't consider it professional development which I think is ridiculous. [Ee2Ref6]

These extremes are exemplified in the ambivalence demonstrated by another college interviewee. The ambiguity and the struggle for this particular decision-maker are noticeable in this exchange. The fully expanded quotes and the emphasis in italics are provided exceptionally here to highlight the ambivalence of the interviewee:

> And I won't do personal growth. I think that it's insulting to them when you know every other employee has professional development you know, things to help them do their job and what do we do for support staff? *We teach them how to make their work areas nice or how to garden better. I think it's totally insulting.* So, I won't do it I also don't think that it, it's not good money, it's not good value for the money in terms of the mission of the college. So it needs to be aligned. If I can't find an alignment, I won't do it. The odd exception might be there's an employee who is really highly respected, good employee *and something's happened and we're going to, you know, cover the cost of a course in flower arranging, …otherwise the consequence is going to be that employee's going to really lose morale and all that kind of stuff.*
>
> …

> I would never say to somebody, okay, if Dianne decided she wanted to go and get a Masters in Social Work, and it has nothing to do with here, I would never say no. *But I wouldn't fund it.* Because it's public money *…but I would support her, I'd give her time off,* I do, we have all kinds of them. So I, I mean I, I think it's important to support the learning. *I think and the decision is really to fund or not to fund.*
>
> …
>
> Okay so, if we use the retirement one as an example, that is a personal growth. For some people. I think we have a responsibility to help people through that transition. If people can organise their planning around their life, well, then I think they perform better on the job. *So I think there's a line; it's not quite as cut and dry as I don't do personal growth, but I don't do crafts.* We're in the job of developing people to do a job. And some of that's personal I guess. [Col2Ref2]

> If they're happy, they're not bothering me! You know what I mean. [Sr1Ref1]

This particular exchange is significant because the respondent is a key decision-maker at the college in regards to professional development. Yet, the clearest statement around what the employer or supervisors should approve was based on this bottom line criterion: it should help the employee be productive now. Of course such a statement is very broad and open-ended. In fact two of the college representatives admit to the rules being loose but feel that it works well that way. And perhaps it works well for them, as decision-makers. But, once again, it is useful to look at this reality from the point of view of the employees. This loose approach, which also seems to be utilized by the supervisors, can come across as very subjective to the employees.

##### *5.2.1.3.3 Summary: decision-making in the current state*

This section highlighted the fact that the higher the level of authority, the clearer and the simpler the decision-making process appears to be. The employer seems

comfortable with the ambiguous, open-ended and case-by-case approach to making decisions about acting on learning demands. Those at the receiving end of the decisions, the employees, express much more frustration with the loose criteria. The employees seem to interpret case-by-case decisions as what the rules are, or, they may not be in a position to ask or challenge the decisions made. In both cases, it will be important to recognize that this situation does have an impact on the employees' perception of the employer's support of learning. This was observed in the results from the *Learning Performance Index.* Ultimately, and most critically, this negative perception may influence the employees' own decision to pursue and participate in employer-sponsored learning activities.

#### 5.2.1.4 Summary: Current state of the process for expressing demand for learning and decision-making

When the results from the interviews were analyzed according to the data coding template, several important themes emerged about the current state of the process for expressing demand for learning and decision-making.

*Table 21. Summary of findings: Emerging themes about the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making*

| | Current state of the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Expression of Demand | | Decision-making |
| | Identification of a perceived learning need | Articulation of the demand for learning | |
| Emerging Themes | Self-identification of learning needs by employees<br><br>OR<br><br>Identification of employee learning needs by a party other than employees (employer, regulatory body, supervisor, union) on behalf of employees<br><br>Informal, anecdotal process; No tools for identification / measurement / validation of learning needs | Articulation made by employees to others (employer, union, supervisor, family/friends)<br><br>OR<br><br>Articulation made by others (regulatory body, employer, supervisor) to employees | Authority<br>-Varies by type of learning activity: sometimes employer, supervisor, or employee<br>-Supervisor decisions can be overturned by employer or union<br>-Can be used to express power and control by any of the parties and to communicate messages unrelated to learning<br><br>Criteria<br>-Easily defined: must benefit current or future job<br>-Difficult to apply<br><br>-Ambiguity is difficult for those at the receiving end of the decision<br>- Some appreciation for subjectivity (i.e. discretion) for those making the decisions |

These themes have confirmed the steps that were established in the literature on the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2006). However, this in-depth look at how those steps actually take place has further reinforced the fact that there are several parties interacting during those steps. The details behind this interaction unveiled more of the complexity involved. They have also

begun to shape a deeper understanding about the decision-making process and the influence of the asymmetrical relationships on the outcome of the process.

### *5.2.2 Expressing demand for learning: Expected state*

When describing the existing process of expressing demand for learning, interviewees often alluded to their expectations. Separating the current and the expected states is almost as artificial and difficult as isolating the specific steps of the process for expressing demand for learning. Nevertheless, this section will focus specifically on the interviewees' responses when asked to re-tell their learning participation story if it had happened in an ideal world. The objectives are to identify the extent of the gap between the current and expected states and to also compare the expectations of each group.

#### 5.2.2.1 Expectations for identifying perceived learning needs

When it comes to identifying learning needs, the expectations of the three interview groups are consistently the same. All interviewees mentioned that identifying learning needs should be a joint, collaborative process, particularly between the employee and the supervisor. In addition, there is agreement on the concept that everyone who observes a behaviour that needs improvement should take responsibility for identifying that learning need. There is also consensus that the employer should be in charge of setting the direction and therefore setting the stage for supervisors and employees to identify their learning needs based on that direction. Interviewees feel that the employer should identify learning needs at an organizational level, supervisors should identify the learning needs of their unit and of individual employees, the union should identify the learning needs of employees, and the employees should identify their own learning needs as well. In other words, everyone expects all parties to take an active role in identifying

learning needs. One supervisor in fact indicated that she agrees it should be a joint process but that ‘joint’ means employees have to take some ownership and take charge of identifying some of their learning needs. This almost to say that if the employees do not meet the supervisor half way, then the supervisor is not inclined to do their part either. Hence perhaps some of the cases reported earlier when Professional Development days go unused and learning goes un-discussed for some employees.

The use of tools that can facilitate the identification of learning needs also became a recurring theme among all groups. For the employer for example, there is a wish for a tool that would more effectively identify the learning needs of employees across the college and that would then match those needs to learning opportunities offered to the employees. This would ensure that the employees who would benefit the most from those opportunities be able to attend specific workshops. The comment was made by the employer in response to a frustration around seniority sometimes becoming the criteria for deciding who should attend workshops offered by the employer.

One employee went as far as suggesting that upon hire, a vocational assessment could be conducted and then retaken or reviewed occasionally to track progress, adjust goals and therefore adjust the learning plan. This differentiation is quite an insightful perspective on the part of the employee. And although there is consensus that the supervisor should get to know their employees to get to know their aspirations, the employees do not necessarily expect their supervisor to be able to tell them what their learning needs are. One employee pointed out how, being a college, all the facilities for such a service are there in regards to career counselling but those services are not used by employees.

5.2.2.2 Expectations for articulating the learning demand

The expectations for articulating the learning demand are closely aligned with those for identifying the learning needs. There is again consensus on the fact that whoever identifies a learning need has the responsibility to initiate a conversation and articulate the learning demand. Some variations and additions on this theme were provided by the different interviewee groups.

The employer group agreed that it should not be anyone's sole responsibility but everyone's responsibility to articulate and express learning demands. However, it added that employees need to understand that articulating a learning demand does not mean it will be acted upon. "Employees need to realize we can't fund everything they ask for, you know, like dance classes" [Col4Ref7]. Moreover, when talking about this ideal and expected state, the college group added that although everyone should articulate what they identified as a need, they cannot assume it is a real learning need and it is the employer's role to put those demands into the full context before acting on them. In a similar vein, the union mentioned that employees should take responsibility for understanding the organization, keeping up to date with its direction and priorities, and seeing how they and their learning demands fit in that picture. In other words, there is an expectation that employees, on their own account, will not articulate learning demands that are clearly not aligned with the employer's strategic goals. This would imply that the direction and the decision criteria are very well communicated and clear to employees. Yet we have seen from the analysis of the artefacts that communication is not as formalized as may be necessary for this employee group.

On the employee side, once again, interesting insights were expressed. Employees expect follow through and honesty when they express a learning demand. They also wish

it would always be safe to talk to their supervisor about their interests, particularly when the interest might be related to a future, different job. They expect the supervisors to support them in that. They too agree that both they and the supervisors need to initiate the conversation about learning but, there is an expectation that it is up to the supervisor to initiate the dialogue that will lead to getting to know the employees better. They also expect the supervisor to trigger the performance review dialogue, yearly, consistently. And, most interestingly, the employees each pointed out, in their own way, that the dialogue need not be just about gaps. They see their supervisor in a position to help them identify what their strengths are and to initiate a dialogue about the skills they should grow and the direction they could take. This was the first time that a focus on strengths was brought up specifically. And, although the model itself talks about identifying gaps between an individual's current skill set and his or her goals, in itself the model does not imply identifying learning needs in areas of weakness per se. Yet, this is what most interviewees gravitated toward. This is probably representative of a traditional, long-standing approach to professional development. The employees' comments are a good reminder of how both strength and deficit are implied in the learning gap model.

The supervisors' views are fairly aligned with those of the employer and the employees. However, they certainly make a point of mentioning how much they wish for the employees' initiative and 'take charge' attitude. They admit to their responsibility of being a 'pro-active facilitator' and occasionally say to the employees, "Hey, this is being offered, you should go". But they consistently follow this comment with "and the employees should occasionally say, hey, this is what I found, what do you think?" [Sup2Ref11]. In other words, the ideal world of the supervisors would be a balanced

responsibility for initiating the dialogue. They also give the sense that even though they wish for a balanced approach, it helps them if the employee initiates the first dialogue.

Perhaps this is where we run into the issue reported in the current state. If two parties agree that it is both their responsibility to initiate dialogue, then it is unclear how one determines who will start. There is a sense here that despite this amiable agreement about this ideal joint responsibility, beyond the surface, there is actually an expectation on both sides, about who should *really* get the dialogue started. Employees mention how if they see their supervisor showing interest in their aspirations, they will be more inclined to take charge and discuss their learning needs. Meanwhile, the supervisors say that if they see their employees showing initiative, they will be more inclined to engage in a dialogue about learning needs and occasionally take the initiative to point out development ideas or opportunities. There is a risk here because joint responsibility may in fact mean that no one takes responsibility for articulating the learning demand. As a result, one of the critical antecedents to decision-making and participation – the discussion - never happens.

The concept of joint responsibility is not new. A thorough review of the literature and practices in Canadian workplaces showed that when asked, all stakeholders believe that the employee's learning should be a joint responsibility, including the employees (Butterfield et al., 2008). This is consistent with the ten interviews conducted among the four stakeholder groups participating in this research. However, the limitations of joint responsibility have been expressed over and over in the literature and so far through the analysis of the results. Attempting to operate from a point of view of joint responsibility between four parties interacting within a hierarchy and within the rules of asymmetrical power is incongruent and impractical. Aside from requesting that the learner be trusting

and trustworthy of the supervisor (Hughes, 2004), this approach also assumes that the employee has access to information and tools, has the capability to identify learning needs and has the ability to express those needs (Sigot & Vero, 2009). Yet we know that for the group studied, this is not likely to be the case (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004)

Then, the issue of initiation comes into play. Although it has been recommended that the career and development conversation be separated from the performance appraisal (Oleson, White, & Lemmer, 2007), the reality is that most of the time it is not (Butterfield et al., 2008). Typically, it is the manager who is responsible for initiating the performance appraisal process and consequently, the dialogue about learning needs. Yet we know that these conversations do not happen regularly (Lambert et al., 2009) or when they do, they often lack follow through (Kidd, Hirsh, & Jackson, 2004). All the models for vocational learning conversations reviewed in the literature describe the roles of each party in great detail, describe the tools, the training required by managers to effectively conduct this conversation, the support required by employees and the extent of the infrastructure needed to facilitate this process (Butterfield et al., 2008; Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, 2005). Yet not one is firm or specific about the party responsible for initiating the process. The consensus is that the manager is responsible for initiating the performance appraisal but the employee is ultimately responsible for their career.

This persistent ambiguity reflected in the literature is a risk for lower-skilled and older employees and we have seen how it plays out in a power relationship in this study. The expectation on the part of the employees for a formal structure and for the supervisor to initiate is perfectly legitimate according to the literature (Butterfield et al., 2008;

Cedefop, 2010; Hughes, 2004; Lambert et al., 2009). This is a key finding and perhaps the most insightful theme to have emerged from this study. The literal and graphical depiction of various processes and cycles are often used in research literature because they are a useful way of capturing a series of complex interactions between various elements. However, what is often omitted, intentionally or not, is the detail behind the catalytic aspect of the process. The process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making may have fallen victim to this common oversight. Yet, we are finding now that without ensuring that at least one party is formally held accountable for triggering the process, participation in learning may not happen.

#### 5.2.2.3 Expectations for decision-making

By the time the parties get to decision-making, the gaps in expectations have widened even further, particularly when it comes to the ownership for the decision. In fact, the expectations of the employer, supervisors and employees very much reflect the frustrations expressed in the current state.

The employer expects the decision to be made based on the overall college needs, current and future. It does not see seniority as an appropriate criterion and would prefer that those who are given opportunities be employees in good standing. When resources are tight, skills required for the job, in other words vocational learning needs, should always be given priority. Overall, the employer still feels that decisions need to be made based on the responsibility it has to develop a broad skill base among staff to position itself for future opportunities.

Meanwhile, the supervisors and the employees long for much clearer guidelines. The inherent subjectivity of the employer's overall criteria leaves the supervisors feeling

as the ‘bad guy’ in the decision-making process because they perceive themselves as the only party put in a position to deny employee requests for learning activities. And there is some truth to that since the employees interviewed only ever blamed the supervisors for learning requests being declined. Still, because supervisors are ultimately accountable for their budgets and operations, they expect to have ownership of the decision. The fact that the employer occasionally deals directly with the employees in the process of identifying learning needs and articulating learning demands, really does not help the supervisor. As far as the supervisors are concerned, greater clarity of roles, in addition to clearer criteria, would be beneficial. This intuitive request on the part of the supervisor and employees has been found to have significant legitimacy in studies of participation in employee learning. To date, it has been possible to correlate the level of formality and institutionalization of the training and development function in the workplace with higher intensity and levels of participation (Bélanger & Robitaille, 2008; Cedefop, 2010).

The interviews with the college, the supervisors and the employees also unveiled, unexpectedly, an unusual category of learning participants: the non-learners. In most learning participation studies, employees are typically categorized as either participants or non-participants in employer-sponsored learning. Then, participants are traditionally categorized according to the type of learning activities they chose. During the interview portion about expectations, many of the respondents tended to speak about what they wished did not happen instead of describing what they expected to happen. Then when speaking about who gets to participate in learning activities and the frustration around seniority being part of the criteria, it was mentioned that there are employees who participate in learning activities for no reason other than getting out of work. These employees are perceived to be taking advantage of their employer’s positive view and

encouragement for workplace learning, the overall educational mandate of the college, the support for employee learning, their seniority, and the fact that any learning activity put on by the employer for employees does not count toward their three Professional Development days. For this group, unless the supervisors can identify a specific operational need for declining the request, the subjectivity, open-endedness and lack of tracking around the learning decision become quite beneficial. This is an unusual participant group for whom participation is less about learning and perhaps more about exercising control over their work where they have found ways. This behaviour is interesting in its own way and would be most likely associated with non-formal learning, the type of learning that is probably the least committal as far as the learning process is concerned. Intended informal learning requires a certain amount of self-awareness, self-directedness and learning motivation while formal learning has a built-in accountability component through evaluation and grades. On the other hand non-formal learning offered by the employer does not require employees to truly identify or articulate learning demands nor commit to demonstrating that learning has occurred. It is therefore possible for employees to participate in such learning activities for purposes and motivations other than learning. This is an interesting finding, one which deserves further investigation in the future.

#### 5.2.2.4 Summary: expected state of the process for expressing demand for learning and decision-making

Examining the expected state of the process for expressing demand for learning and decision-making was intended to identify potential gaps relative to the current state and also between the four parties interviewed. The following summary table (Table 22, p.216) shows how the parties were not far apart initially when discussing the

identification of learning needs. Nor was there much of a gap with the current state. However, as their reflection shifted toward articulating learning needs and decision-making, the gaps widened between respondent groups and a greater sense of frustration with the current state was expressed.

*Table 22. Summary of findings: Expected state of the process for expressing demand for learning and decision-making*

| | Expected state of the process for expressing demand for learning and decision-making | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Expression of Demand | | Decision-making |
| | Identification of a perceived learning need | Articulation of the demand for learning | |
| Gaps between current and expected states | -Common desire for a collaborative process between all parties, particularly between supervisor and employees<br><br>-All who observe a gap should identify a need | - All who identify a learning need have responsibility for articulating the demand | |
| Gaps between respondent groups | - Supervisors' wish for employees to take charge of identifying learning needs | -Employer's belief in shared responsibility<br>-Supervisors' belief in employee responsibility to initiate<br>-Employees' belief in supervisor's responsibility to initiate | -Employer's belief that criteria is based on employer's need; sufficiently clear as criteria<br>-Supervisors and employees' wish for clearer guidelines<br>-Supervisor's frustration with employer's direct relationship with employees |
| Emerging themes | -Use of specific tools and forms would be beneficial | -Joint responsibility may be too ambiguous and leave no one with the accountability to initiate | -New type of participant in employer-sponsored: the non-learners (participate for motives other than learning) |

Overall, the parties' varying opinions on how decision-making ought to be framed is a reflection and perhaps a covert recognition of the power associated with this important part of the process. The fact that supervisors and employees are asking the employer for better guidelines may indicate a desire to remove some of the power in the equation. Yet, the fact that the employer continues to express comfort with its role as provider of the overall and broad direction may also indicate a desire not to take on more power either. In the end, the key expectation around expressing demand for learning and decision-making, particularly for supervisors and employees, is that things should be different.

### *5.2.3 Factors that facilitate or inhibit the process of expressing demand for learning*

The factors that facilitate or inhibit the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making were identified by all groups during the interviews. The facilitators often came up when interviewees described their expectations on how the process should work whereas the inhibitors were identified mostly while participants were telling the story of how they are currently experiencing the antecedents to participation in employer-sponsored learning activities. The findings for both types of conditions are summarized in this section.

#### 5.2.3.1 Factors that facilitate the expression of demand

There was a significant amount of convergence among all groups in regards to the conditions that facilitate the expression of the demand for learning and decision-making. The categories of facilitators, not surprisingly, very much mirrored the themes that have emerged and been discussed while deconstructing each antecedent to participation in the previous sections. They tended to gravitate around communication, relationships, policies

and guidelines, time, process, overall environment and the character profile of employees.

*Table 23. Summary of the factors that facilitate the expression of the demand for learning and decision-making, by interviewee group*

| Interviewee Group / Facilitating Factors | Employer | Union | Supervisors | Employees |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Situational** | | | | |
| Relationships | √ *(relationship between college and employees)* | √ *(relationship between supervisors and employees)* | √ *(relationship between college and employees)* | √ *(relationship between them and people who know and they trust.* |
| Permission from supervisor | √ | X | X | √ |
| Time | √ | X | √ | √ |
| **Institutional** | | | | |
| Communication (promotion, discussions) | √ | X | √ | √ |
| College environment | √ | X | √ | √ |
| Policies, guidelines, programs | √ | X | X | √ |
| Ease of registration | √ | X | √ | √ |
| **Dispositional** | | | | |
| Employee interested in new / different position | X | X | √ | √ |
| Employee character (self-directed, curious, outgoing) | X | X | √ | √ |

√ = Interview mentioned item as a facilitating factor for the expression of the demand for learning and decision-making)
X = Interview group did not mention item as a facilitating factor

The concept of relationships and its sister concept of communication, was where the employer, the supervisors and the employees, put the most emphasis. For the union, the relationship between the employees and their supervisors was in fact the only facilitating factor mentioned. For others in the employer group, relationships are to be cultivated mainly between the employer and the employees, in order to create an open and trusting environment for expressing needs. Communication on the other hand was deemed as a facilitating factor because it helps promote learning and it helps everyone see the alignment between learning and the employer's objective. Interestingly, when the supervisor group and employee group talked about relationships, it was about employees making connections with people they trust and people who know them so they can freely speak about their learning goals and get honest feedback. But neither group referred to this relationship as being between the supervisors and employees. This is particularly consistent with the findings from Hughes (2004) who examined the preferred method by which employees seek assistance at work and where they tend to confide. Trust was a key factor and the employees preferred to develop their trustworthiness with their boss rather than work on trusting their boss.

Similarly, in our study, the supervisors do not see that making those kinds of connections with staff is their role and the employees do not see a fit or a remote possibility for their supervisor to play that role. Yet there is strong agreement that an honest conversation with someone who knows you, in other words, with someone with whom you have a relationship, is essential. When this notion is juxtaposed to the decision-making issues, and the fact that the supervisor for the most part makes the final decision about participation, it is interesting to see that supervisors and employees do not

readily perceive their relationship as a possible facilitating condition preceding participation in a learning activity.

Another area of general consensus relates to how the overall employer environment is in itself conducive to participation. Employees talk about the fact that by working at a college, they are immersed in the system and by proxy learn a lot about how further education works, how to access it, register and participate in it. For the employer and the supervisors the college environment means that learning, as the core business, is an easy sell to employees and that the physical and logistical infrastructure greatly facilitate the process preceding participation in learning.

Issues related to time, in this case, the ability to release and adjust an employee's schedule within a department is perceived by all groups as a huge advantage over other employees whose jobs and shifts are not flexible. These same groups also agreed that the registration process needed to be easily accessible.

The employee and the supervisor groups agreed on two more facilitating factors: when employees have an interest in a new or different position and when employees are self-confident, motivated, outgoing, curious and self-motivated. Both groups agreed that when employees display or possess these traits, the process of expressing demand and even decision-making is facilitated. The supervisors talk about how they are much more inclined to support and approve participation in learning when it is coming from employees who are pro-active, show interest in their work and initiate the discussion with their supervisors. It is no surprise that in the end, the dispositional attributes of the employees is revealed as a key facilitating factor. The interviewees were atypical participants in learning and it has become clear that it is their dispositional traits that have helped them overcome the predictor model which would have expected them not to

participate according to their age, education and occupation (Bélanger et al., 2004). Employees, and most learners for that matter, tend to have more control over their disposition, compared to control over their institution and their situation. In this case, this may very well have been the determining factor.

Lastly, the employer and the employee groups agreed that clear guidelines, policies and programs and the supervisors' permission were ideal facilitating factors of the entire process preceding participation in employer-sponsored learning activities. This is consistent with other research (Sigot & Vero, 2009).

5.2.3.2 Factors that inhibit the expression of demand

The list of inhibitors that affect the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making has some parallels with the list of facilitators just discussed. The themes of relationships, time, communication, and employee character emerged again. This is somewhat expected since most interviewees spoke of inhibitors in effect by talking about facilitators that were absent in the process. Facilitators and inhibitors came across essentially as being two sides of the same issues. Still, when discussed through the lens of the inhibitors, there are patterns worth noting.

It is no surprise to see all groups agreeing on the issues of time and communication. These two situational and institutional barriers, respectively, surface consistently in studies of barriers to participation. In essence, they are relatively concrete and safe to talk about. However, it was noted in the literature review in Chapter 2 that those types of barriers can often be just the symptoms of other situational and particularly dispositional issues. The following quote gives us a clue in that direction:

> There are hundreds of employees who don't have regular access to the internet. It becomes 100% of their own time, to go outside to their computers and tools to go on the website, find out what is going on and register. So it isn't going to happen. Often that means they'll say – I don't care. I'll wait until my manager tells me I am to take something. [Col4Ref10]

Such a response is not just related to the lack of access to information. There is a dispositional component that seems to relate back to the employees' covert expectations and belief about which party ought to be initiating the dialogue about learning. This is despite the fact that all groups reported earlier that the process of articulating the demand for learning was a joint responsibility.

Meanwhile, the communication issues are themselves intertwined with the time issues, as illustrated by the view expressed by this supervisor:

> We are connected to the college but a lot of that connection comes from me. Unless you go to your email but there's too much stuff on email. I have to flag things for them. I should be saying – Oh by the way, this is coming out, you should go – I should be doing that but I don't have time. [Sup1Ref8]

In this case, there is some recognition of the supervisor's own role in initiating dialogue but lack of time gets blamed for that not happening. This finding becomes even more interesting when noting that the supervisors are the only group not directly mentioning a poor relationship between employees and their managers as a potential inhibitor. Meanwhile, they are also the only group mentioning the fact that employees may not be aware of, or be able to identify, their skills gaps. Although they may very well be right about the latter, a lack of awareness about the possible importance of their relationship with staff results in a finger-pointing, circular situation. This type of impasse often results in parties displacing the problem outside of the circle, in a more neutral

zone. In this case, it becomes more convenient and easy for everyone to agree that time and communication of programs are the key barriers, especially since doing so moves the problem somewhat outside the realm of control for employees and supervisors.

*Table 24. Summary of the factors that inhibit the expression of the demand for learning and decision-making, by interviewee group*

| Interviewee Group / Inhibiting Factor | Employer | Union | Supervisors | Employees |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Situational** | | | | |
| TIME *(e.g. lack of time, poor timing of program, scheduling problem, workload concerns, replacement costs)* | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| MANAGER ROLE *(e.g. managers not fulfilling their role consistently across college, lack of accountability)* | X | √ | √ | X |
| **Institutional** | | | | |
| COMMUNICATION *(e.g poor access to information, no time to promote, lack of awareness of programs, difficulty in registration)* | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| CRITERIA *(e.g. unclear policies, inconsistency in approval criteria)* | X | X | X | √ |
| VALUE OF LEARNING *(e.g. perceived poor value of learning offered, absence or weak link to one's job)* | √ | √ | √ | X |
| **Dispositional** | | | | |
| ABILITY TO LEARN *(e.g. concerned about ability to learn)* | X | X | X | √ |
| POOR RELATIONSHIP *(e.g. unsafe work environment, fear of asking manager, not being approved, expectations of manager afterward)* | √ | √ | X | √ |
| SELF-AWARENESS *(e.g. inability to identify learning needs, lack of awareness of skills gaps)* | X | X | √ | X |

√ = Interview mentioned item as an inhibiting factor for the expression of demand and decision-making

X = Interview group did not mention item as an inhibiting factor for the expression of demand and decision-making

One other finding, most notable by the missing checkmarks, is the fact that no one but the employees seems aware of the fears and concerns the employees have about their ability to learn. The employees are also alone in seeing the lack of clear guidelines and policies as an actual inhibitor. Another absent checkmark is noted around the inhibitor related to the perceived lack of value or link to job. It appears as though the college, union and supervisor groups are making the assumption that the lack of perceived value of the learning offered is what is keeping the employees away while the employees themselves do not spontaneously mention that reason as a barrier. Once again, making such an assumption shifts the responsibility away from the much needed dialogue between the supervisors and the employees, which is dependent on a healthy and safe relationship. Yet, it is not the employees who mention the manager-related problems. It is the union and the supervisors themselves. This is interesting and similar to the findings about facilitators. Here again, it is as though the employees do not have expectations of such a relationship or they do not see such a relationship possible.

When the facilitators and inhibitors identified by these groups are compared to the literature, this group is generally experiencing and referring to very typical institutional, dispositional barriers (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004; Sigot & Vero, 2009). However, this qualitative study seems to have allowed for situational issues and for additional dispositional issues to emerge more clearly. In particular, issues related to the relationships between a supervisor and an employee, although very clear throughout this section and the previous others, is not something that is typically discussed in learning participation studies. Hughes' study (2004) on the supervisor's influence on workplace learning is a rare exception. In 2008, Belanger & Robitaille were still identifying the need

to keep in mind the inevitable tension between the employer's performance needs and the lifelong learning journey of the individual employees.(Bélanger & Robitaille, 2008).

### *5.2.4 Roles played by the parties involved in the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making*

One of the key questions for this study focuses on the roles played, currently and expected, by various parties during the process of expressing the learning demand and decision-making. The concept of roles cannot be truly isolated from all the other concepts associated with the antecedents to participation analyzed so far. This is why it has surfaced several times in earlier discussions. However, it was discussed in Chapter 2 that there are several stakeholders involved in the process of expressing demand for learning and that each stakeholder – employer, union, supervisors, employee - has a specific role to play in order for the process to work and achieve the desired outcome (Bélanger & Federighi, 2000; Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2006). Consequently, a specific analysis of this concept offers an opportunity for additional insight into the impact of roles on the participation outcome.

Table 25 (p.227) provides a summary of what each group said about their role and about the other group's roles during the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making. Each column allows for a comparison between the expectations of self, and the expectations the others have of self. In the employer column, there is a fairly good alignment among all groups, particularly between the union and the employer. However, the supervisors and the employees have greater expectations for the employer. For example, both groups indicate that it is the role of the employer to set parameters around the process of expressing demand for learning and particularly for decision-making. The supervisors, the group most concerned with managing resources, expect the

employer to play a role in making the resources available. Meanwhile, the employees who expressed frustration with the lack of follow through and action give this responsibility to the employer. In other words, this summary shows there is recognition among all groups that the process mainly happens between the supervisors and the employees. But there is also an expectation for the employer and the union to be playing a form of mediating support role by providing the resources and the rules.

The expectations for supervisors are similar among all groups and there is a fair amount of alignment. These role expectations are also in line with best practices in the literature (Cedefop, 2010; Sigot & Vero, 2009). Still, there are a few flags worth raising. First, it is not clear that the supervisors recognize their role in creating a safe environment for employees to speak up.

*Table 25. Comparative analysis of each interviewee group's view on their and the other party's roles during the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making.*

| **Role of the:**<br>**As viewed by:** | Employer | Supervisors | Union | Employees |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Employer** | Help when learning aligns with strategic goals and direction<br><br>Set direction<br><br>Identify learning need for that direction<br><br>Track, record, promote | Identify and communicate needs they have for their unit<br><br>Facilitate, coach<br><br>Ensure opportunities are there<br><br>Refer employees to PD | Bring what they hear to the college<br><br>Advocate for learning / employees | Realize college can't fund everything<br><br>Take charge of their learning, say what they think they need<br><br>Start the conversation about their needs if they have some |
| **Supervisors** | Provide resources, time, funding<br><br>Provide parameters<br><br>Provide in-house PD | Pro-actively facilitate discussion<br><br>Pro-actively provide learning environment<br><br>Promote, market learning<br><br>Support, encourage employees<br><br>Share responsibilities with employees to identify and initiate | Encourage employees<br><br>Support employees if managers don't<br><br>Ensure college is providing training opportunities<br><br>Monitor at a high level | Tell supervisors what they want, where they want to be, what their 'big plan' is<br><br>Take advantage of PD opportunities<br><br>Show interest in their job and beyond; learn more about their job |

*Table 25.(continued) Comparative analysis of each interviewee group's view on their and the other party's roles during the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making*

| Role of the: As viewed by: | Employer | Supervisors | Union | Employees |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Union** | Identify training needs<br><br>Create learning environment<br><br>Communicate direction<br><br>Communicate organizational learning needs<br><br>Provide means for equal participation and access via various formats | Share responsibility with employees to have conversation<br><br>Create safe environment for discussion<br><br>Get to know their employees' aspirations<br><br>Make the final decision about learning | Be the voice for people who feel they can't speak<br><br>Communicate gaps<br><br>Ensure everybody is treated fairly and equitably. | Share responsibility with managers to have conversation<br><br>Try to achieve their career goals<br><br>Identify the training they want<br><br>Understand where the college is going, educate themselves about college |
| **Employees** | Disseminate information<br><br>Support employees<br><br>Set the criteria and parameters<br><br>Review performance appraisal documents and pro-actively act on them; follow up with manager or employee<br><br>Advise, provide career guidance<br><br>Provide career opportunities internally (promotions) | Come up with ideas together with employees and reach mutual agreement<br><br>Suggest training to employees<br><br>Talk to the union pro-actively to ensure their support<br><br>Know all the college policies and programs to better coach, guide employees | Make requests and ideas happen by working with the college<br><br>Disseminate information together with the college<br><br>Support employees | Bring up ideas with managers and reach mutual agreement<br><br>Make own decision about professional development |

This potential blind spot could lead them to be oblivious to employees who are not having or are avoiding learning conversations. This is evidenced by the apparent contradictions in the supervisors expressed expectations. On one hand, the supervisors expect themselves to be fairly pro-active but on the other hand, they express a strong preference toward employees being pro-active and telling managers what they want. Meanwhile, they talk about this process really being a shared responsibility. Needless to say, supervisors are not truly clear on their own roles and their expectations of the employees' role. This could be problematic, especially since all parties mention the concept of responsibility but no one ever mentioned accountability. This is also problematic in light of the identity of the employee as worker first to his supervisor and the difficulty it poses for the employee to initiate conversation about learning (Hughes, 2004). Hence perhaps the need to explore accountabilities. If two parties are responsible but neither is made accountable, it is very likely that the process will fall through the cracks in departments and business units where, for a myriad of good reasons, no one initiates the dialogue. If the employees and supervisors expect the employer to set the parameters and provide guidelines, this is one area where clear direction could be beneficial.

Also worth noting is how the employees see room for the union to be much more hands-on. They see the role of the union as working closely with the employer, particularly for communication and promotion of learning. There is also an expectation that they could work with the employer to ensure follow through on learning requests. This type of thinking is akin to the successful experiment with Union Labour Representatives in the U.K. as trusted and effective ambassadors of learning (Cedefop,

2003). Employees have high expectations for their managers and would like to see them much more knowledgeable of all programs and policies so they can play a better role in advising them. Meanwhile, and not surprisingly, the employees express the desire to play a role in decision-making, particularly when it comes to professional development. This is important to recognize especially since no one else saw them as playing a decision-making role. This is an obvious misalignment that should be addressed. Roles, and especially accountabilities, should be discussed, tested, clarified and communicated even where there appears to be an existing implicit agreement.

## 5.3 Discussion of key findings

The analysis of the data has generated several important findings that can contribute to the research and knowledge gaps identified at the beginning of this study. In the first chapter, three research and knowledge gaps were identified: the potential impact of the economic drivers on employee participation in employer-sponsored learning, the potential misalignment between the employer's offer and the employees' uptake of learning activities, and the lack of more detailed information about the process that precedes participation, including the impact of the interaction between the various stakeholders. The research questions and methodology were engineered accordingly and the data analysis has now led to key findings that can be discussed in relation to the established research and knowledge gaps.

### *5.3.1 Alignment between the employer's offer and the employees' uptake*

Until the recent publication of Céreq's study on the employer and employee training practices (Lambert et al., 2009) there had been no known attempts to directly compare the employer and employee data on learning. Hence this gap had been identified as part of this research. There was a need to look at the potential misalignment since the employees' uptake was often reported as the same as the employer's offer or vice versa. This was a deemed a gross assumption and we suggested that perhaps the employer's offer was not maximized and, or that some employees' needs were not met. The data analysis helped us determine that it was possible for both suggestions to be true. This was due to a misalignment between the employer's institutional profile and the employee's situational and dispositional profile. It also seems to be due to a lack of communication between employers and employees. Those two findings are discussed in more details in this section.

#### 5.3.1.1 Misalignment between the employer and employee profiles

One problem that emerged as a potential reason for the offer and the uptake to be misaligned is the difference between the employer's institutional profile and the employee's situational and dispositional profiles. On one hand, we found that the majority of the employees surveyed choose informal learning at the exclusion of formal learning, and many of them for their vocational development. According to the predictor model, this was to be expected for this group of workers, based on their age, occupation and education (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004; Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006) and their typical disposition toward learning. This poses a challenge for both employees and employers based on the typical employer institutional barrier related to tracking,

transferability and recognition (Bélanger & Robitaille, 2008). It has been well documented that employers are largely biased toward formal learning when hiring, even with internal candidates, and that employees who have an unrecognized informal or non-formal learning portfolio are at a disadvantage when it comes to advancement (Bloom & Grant, 2002). The tracking and recognition of non-formal learning is therefore problematic particularly for those who reported wishing to prepare for a future job. What is even more problematic is the fact that a large number of employees choose self-directed learning exclusively and therefore do not get recognition for it. Non-formal learning is often recorded by the provider. Some even issue certificates of attendance. However, self-directed learning is the most difficult to track and to have recognized. Yet, 15% of the respondents relied solely on this method of learning last year. It is fair to suggest that the college, as an employer, and the supervisors, do not really know the extent to which staff is learning, what they are learning and how they are choosing to learn. This means a diminished opportunity to recognize employees and to maximize the application of their learning. This missed opportunity and waste in potential productivity and utilization of lower-skilled, older workers was well captured in the work of Livingstone (1999b) . This is not to say that employees should defer to a different type of learning, on the contrary. This issue merely reinforces the fact that greater efforts towards tracking and recognition are needed from all parties.

In the end, this gap in preferences partially explains why we cannot always assume that the employer's offer, which tends to gravitate to formal and non-formal learning (Cedefop, 2010), is a reflection of the employees' uptake. This was the case here where we heard about learning opportunities offered by the employer that were not

maximized by the employees. In the reverse, analysing only the employees' participation in the employer-sponsored activities does not capture the extent of the learning that is going on in the workplace. It is therefore important to study employee participation and employer offer separately and to then enrich the reports through a comparison of the two sources of input.

5.3.1.2 Lack of information exchange between employer, supervisors and employees

The other factor potentially contributing to the misalignment between the employer's offer and the employees' uptake may stem from the lack of formal communication about learning between the employer and the employees. The lack of employer recognition for the employees' informal learning has been an ongoing, common problem in the workplace (Bloom & Grant, 2002). However, the interesting problem revealed in the data analysis is the fact that the lack of recognition for learning efforts may be a mutual issue between the employees and the employer. This mutual lack of recognition for learning efforts could be reflecting an overall lack of information being exchanged between employer, supervisors and employees. This problem manifested itself in the results of the *Learning Performance Index* where we found a gap in perception between employees and the employer about the college being an organization highly supportive of learning. One possible explanation for this gap is that front line staff are often less aware of organizational efforts toward workplace learning than senior leaders who have the broadest view of the organization. In fact, as providers of learning and as the decision-makers behind the learning offer, the respondents from the employer and supervisor groups may find it better and more adequate than the recipients of the offer.

Somehow the employees are not aware and, or are not accessing information about the employer's learning offer. This may be due to their position in the organization and employers must take this into consideration (Lambert et al., 2009). Yet we know that a lack of access to information can be a potential barrier if information regarding learning opportunities, guidance, counselling and career planning are not provided sufficiently by the employer (Fitzgerald et al., 2003). Looking back at the results from the *Learning Profile Survey*s, only 12 of those who participated in informal learning, including non-formal learning, did so upon receiving information from their employer. Everyone else (n=71) relied on information from family, friends, colleagues, or report not receiving any information or guidance at all. This could be a significant finding because it could explain the gap in perception, indicate a weakness in communication and provide insight into possible solutions.

#### *5.3.2 Deconstructing the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making to identify specific barriers*

Another important research and knowledge gap driving this study relates to the lack of detailed information about the specific steps involved in the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making and the impact of the interactions between the stakeholders involved. In this regard, this study identified two key aspects of the process that may be further reinforcing the predictors of non-participation: the reliance on self-assessment for identifying learning needs and the lack of role clarity when articulating the learning demand. The specifics of these issues are discussed in more details in this section.

5.3.2.1 Identification of perceived learning needs: Problems and limitations

By deconstructing the process for the expression of learning demand into more specific steps, it was possible to reveal problems within the process, starting with the identification of perceived learning needs. When we examined this component of the model there were several reports indicating that at some point, the employer, the supervisor or the employee identified a learning need. However, there was little mention of *how* the learning need was identified. There is reason to believe that based on the fact that none of the interviewees mentioned any particular tools or process for guiding the needs identification, even when probed, no systematic approach was utilized. This is despite the fact that assessing learning needs is an important yet complex process in itself.

Bélanger and Federighi (2000) commented on how the process of identifying a learning need as part of the process of expressing demand for learning needs to include an infrastructure. This infrastructure is needed to support the individual with information, funding, counselling and time, support for the diagnostics and planning of learning, provision of the appropriate space for the expression and realization of a learning need and for the overall improvement of learning environments. Based on the findings comparing the current and expected states, in this study, the employer does a good job of providing the space, i.e. various forums and forms, to elicit the expression of learning needs. However, the employees, whose learning needs are being identified, commented on the lack of counselling, communication and awareness of information, including information on their performance or on career opportunities. The role of the supervisors in providing this kind of counselling and information has been well established in the

literature but they require tools and extensive training to effective in this aspect of their role (Butterfield et al., 2008). There is probably a significant opportunity for improvement for the employer here. There are policies and procedures in place to trigger the expression of demand but there is not a supported diagnostic process available or utilized by any of the parties reported to be involved in identifying the employees' learning need. The employer and the supervisor groups appear to be using data based on problems observed or complaints received. For the employee group the process of identifying learning needs depends largely on their ability to self-assess and plan their current or future work in a self-directed way.

In addition to the supervisors potentially not living up to their counselling role, the reliance on the employee self-identification, or self-assessment as it is commonly referred to, may also be contributing to weakening the process and the participation outcome. This is mainly due to the fact that self-assessment, the pre-cursor to 'gap awareness' in our model for the expression of demand for learning, is itself a process with its own institutional, situational and dispositional pre-requisites (Figure 13, p.237).

The institutional pre-requisites to trigger the self-diagnosis process include knowledge of the desired behaviours (Roegiers et al., 1992). Although there was no specific question or comment made on this particular aspect, the fact that the employees commented on the lack of relationship, ongoing dialogue and performance reviews could indicate that the behaviour expectations may or may not be obvious or explicitly communicated to employees. Then, in order for the comparison with the current practice behaviours, the employee would be expected to complete a reflection process.

*Figure 12. The self-assessment process of learning needs (Knowles, 1975)*

A reflective practice assumes situational and dispositional competencies such as self-awareness and the ability to describe situations, critically analyze situations, synthesize experiences to integrate new knowledge with prior knowledge, and then evaluate the reflective experience (Atkins & Murphy, 1993). Aside from those specific skills, such a process also assumes and necessitates character traits discussed before: motivation to improve, confidence, curiosity, openness, accountability and a goal-orientation as well as tools that can provide actual data for reflection (Asadoorian & Batty, 2005). It is likely no coincidence that the three atypical learning participants in our study consistently exhibited such character traits. However, these cannot be expected of all support staff, yet, self-awareness becomes a pre-requisite to participation if the employer or the supervisors do not establish a more elaborate infrastructure to assist employees with this critical steps.

The limitations associated with self-awareness and self-identification can be mitigated if the decision-maker or the recipient of the information is prepared and equipped to validate, interpret, authenticate the appropriateness and the alignment of the learning need identified vis-à-vis the employee's current performance and desires for the future. Otherwise, the learning may not be appropriate for the desired results, or, if the need identified is in response to a workplace problem, not all problems can be solved through learning and skill development. Considering that identifying a learning need is the first step in the process of arriving at participation, addressing and mitigating the existing weaknesses at the onset is essential otherwise the entire process is weakened.

#### 5.3.2.2 Articulation of the demand for learning: Problems with role clarity

The next critical step toward participation in learning that is in some way sponsored by the employer involves articulating a demand for learning. This particular step of the process is supposed to begin with a dialogue. When analysing the data on the articulation of the demand for learning, it became evident that we were likely facing problems with role clarity, particularly when it came to determining who should be included in this dialogue and who should be responsible for initiating the conversation.

In regards to inclusion, it has become apparent that the most critical parties to involve in the dialogue are the supervisors and the employees, mainly based on the fact that the relationship between supervisors and employees was reported by all parties as being an important facilitating factor for the process of expressing demand for learning. This has been discussed extensively in the literature as being the most appropriate arrangement of roles: supervisors and employees have the conversation while the

employer and the union provide infrastructure and information (Butterfield et al., 2008). This is despite the recognition of the tension between the supervisor and the employees, based on issues of trust and asymmetrical power issues (Hughes, 2004). Yet we found many occasions where the supervisors were seemingly cut out of the conversation by the employer as a way for the employer to mitigate the concerns around trust. The long term implications of this approach by the employer need to be considered when deciding to interact and get involved directly with employees. The impact this can have on the relationship between the employee and the supervisor needs to be acknowledged and thought through carefully. Moreover, this triangular situation needs to be looked at from the point of view of the individual employee who may be receiving mixed messages about their role and the role of the supervisor in the learning conversation. Having several channels to articulate learning needs may appear beneficial to some while coming across as confusing, distrusting or disorganized to others. In order to maximize participation, the process needs to be institutionalized and formalized as much as possible for the benefit of the support staff group (Sigot & Vero, 2009).

In regards to initiation, we identified how the lack of role clarity and accountability for the initiation of the dialogue may in fact represent the finding with the most potential for increasing and widening participation. The current and expected states for this important step of the process revealed a nebulous, grey zone where roles are truly unclear. In some way this is not surprising based on the fact that the literature reports mixed views on initiation. Some authors believe the employees should be responsible for initiating this conversation (Jarvis, 2004) while the vast majority view this as the role of the supervisor (Butterfield et al., 2008). In the end, the issue of initiation is often avoided

and survey results report that employers place ultimate responsibility on the employee to take charge of their own career while recognizing that it is in fact a joint responsibility since employers need to provide the employees with support to do this (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, 2005). Such statements acknowledge the need to support employees but do not fully take into account the dispositional factors that may prevent employees from wanting or being able to initiate this discussion (Doray, Bélanger, Motte et al., 2004). This means that employer support should include a system for ensuring that either the supervisor or the employee has articulated learning needs. In other words, if an employee does not initiate the dialogue and if the supervisor does not initiate either, there needs to be mechanisms for the employer to know when to initiate the discussion with the supervisor or with the employee. This is a missed opportunity for the employer to live up to its role of infrastructure provider. It is also a missed opportunity for the union to step up and hold the employer accountable for ensuring the conversations happen, all the while encouraging staff to have the conversation and articulate their learning needs. There is evidence that this is an appropriate role for the union and that it can work (Cedefop, 2003; Livingstone & Raykov, 2005).

This open-ended approach to articulating the learning demand may not work, at least not without some form of tracking. Although there are several venues for employees to articulate their learning demands, there is no way to catch those who are not talking to anybody. There is also no way of ensuring that appropriate needs have been identified in the first place. This speaks to the fact that all forms or sources of input appear to be given a valid, practically equal consideration. What does not transpire is a specific strategy for consolidating all the information gathered, for analyzing the demands articulated,

prioritizing and for feeding back the findings, along with the corresponding employee learning strategy, to the employees and, or to those who articulated needs. It is unclear whether staff see a connection between what they articulated and what the response is, either from the employer or from their supervisor. This further compounds and contributes to the issues of communication and gaps in perceptions identified earlier. Yet we know that employers who have made significant strides in workplace learning have set up more and more formalized, centralized ways of assessing needs and communicating expectations (Bélanger & Robitaille, 2008).

### *5.3.3 The potential impact of the economic drivers on employee participation in employer-sponsored learning*

The remaining knowledge and research gap identified as the basis for this study relates to the impact of the shift toward workplace learning being driven by economic imperatives and a competitive market as opposed to a more humanistic framework. The potential impact of this shift was identified by some authors (Bratton, 2001) and it became interesting to examine if, in light of the asymmetrical power relationship being at play, participation would in fact be affected. The results analysis showed that issues of power and the tension between the employer and the employees' needs did manifest themselves during the process preceding participation or non-participation, more specifically during the decision-making stage. In fact, one of the key findings related to the antecedents to participation is the recognition that decision-making is a distinct step between the process of expressing demand for learning and participation.

There were two important issues identified with this step: criteria and ownership. Those issues made it clear that decision-making is a separate, critical step that cannot

only influence the outcome of an employee going through the process, but most importantly, it can affect the decision of employees to not embark on the process in the future.

5.3.3.1 Interpretation of the decision-making criteria

The analysis of the data showed that the lack of clarity in the decision-making criteria, most specifically around the definition for “alignment” and “professional development”, led employees to believe that there was too much subjectivity in the process. According to the findings from the employee survey conducted by the employer, the issue of subjectivity is not limited to professional development and employee participation in learning activities. In this survey, one of the lowest scores by far (56%) was in regards to the following indicator “Everyone in my department is held equally accountable for excellence in teaching / services”. In this highly functional, engaged organization, the perceived subjectivity of supervisors appears to be a sore point among employees, particularly when all the other dozens of indicators scored so high. Employee participation in learning activities is probably one area where the perceived inequities manifest themselves. When each perception for applying the decision-making criteria is summarized, it appears as though the key weakness is the definition of “alignment” and the definition of what can make an employee more productive now. The potential source for frustration and employee disengagement becomes evident:

*Table 26. Stakeholder interpretation of the criteria for supporting employee participation in learning activities not directly related to their job.*

| Application of the PD definition in decision-making process by each interviewee group | Professional Development (PD)Definition<br>“May or may not be related to current job or future job.”<br>“Everything other than training”. |
|---|---|
| Employer | All PD activities are encouraged but within reason; some alignment with the college must be identified.<br>PD should help the employee be productive in their work now, whatever that means for some employees (e.g. overall well-being). |
| Union | All PD activities are encouraged because it is not always possible to determine whether what may not seem aligned today could become beneficial at a later date.<br>It is not possible to predict what lies ahead for an employee.<br>If the PD activity is offered by the college then an employee should be allowed to take it. |
| Supervisors | All PD activities are encouraged but there is a need to consider operational needs first.<br>The PD activity should align somehow but most anything can align.<br>PD can be a form of recognition and can be used in support of employee morale.<br>Employees also need to be deserving. Supervisors can withhold permission if employee does not appear to be deserving, even if operations allow and if there is alignment. |
| Employees | The process is perceived as subjective.<br>Some employees have experienced decisions being overturned. This is interpreted as the criteria being unclear and / or applied subjectively.<br>Employees do not always wish to appeal.<br>In the employees’ view there is no apparent definition of what ‘alignment’ means. |

This table also highlights another important reality and potential source of inequity brought up only by the supervisor: employee release time and replacement costs. For this group, this was the most important factor in making a decision. If it were not for scheduling and workloads, supervisors would likely approve and find alignment in most anything. Moreover, some supervisors feel at a disadvantage if they manage an area where employees must be replaced at all times (e.g. day care facilities). They do not wish

to turn down employees but they indicate simply not having the funds to replace them while away at a workshop.

The criteria and interpretation gaps highlighted above mirrors the gap found in the results of the *Learning Performance Index* wherein the employer and the employees are at both extremes in perception while the supervisors are closer to the middle, seeing and being pulled by both sides. The supervisors are also the only group faced with the operational and financial realities of the department. The supervisors rely on the employer for guidance and policies but if the organization-wide policies are perceived as loose and if the inequities related to departmental access to learning are not explicitly recognized by the employer, then the supervisors and the employees are potentially in a no-win situation. This is particularly problematic based on the fact that some employees do not appeal or 'fight' decisions and choose to never ask again instead. This was a behaviour reported by the union and by employees interviewed and was also reported in other studies (Hughes, 2004).

The issue of loose interpretation quickly becomes, once again, a tracking issue. In the results section, Table 18 (p.162) included a summary of what respondents said about the use of the three professional development days provided to each full-time support staff, as part of the Collective Agreement. Just like the decision-tree, this snapshot gives the impression that all parties are clear on the subject. But it is important to note that this summary was obtained by using the responses from the interviewees who were somewhat definitive in their views. They tended to be from the employer group. The employees and the supervisors, on the other hand, were not as clear on the purpose of those days, and why some employees use them and some do not. One employee reported being denied

the use of the Professional Development days because the course she wished to take was not related to the job. She considered appealing that decision but then decided it was not worth the fight, she was tired of fighting. What seemed to be clear for the employer and supervisor level may be getting muddied, once again, at the operational, employee level. Moreover, the use of the Professional Development days, perhaps because of that confusion, is not consistent across the support staff group.

This is difficult for the employer or for anyone to truly address because those days are not tracked consistently. The supervisors interviewed said they rarely marked those days on the attendance system. This unstructured approach reinforces the fact that without tracking, those who do not identify learning needs and, or do not initiate a dialogue to express their learning demand potentially fall through the cracks.

Regardless of who has the responsibility to initiate or follow through on the expression of demand for learning, what comes across much more clearly in the decision-making step is how much room there is for interpretation of the criteria and the extent to which this could have a negative impact on participation. In the case of Professional Development days for example, it could be interpreted that the use of these development days is optional. It is for those who want development opportunities. This may not be the message the employer and the union intended when they negotiated this clause in the collective agreement. From the employee perspective, this approach could be easily interpreted as “We encourage you to learn but if you choose not to, it’s fine with us.” If the employer wishes to in fact widen and increase participation in learning among support staff, then this gap in criteria, interpretation and tracking should really be closed.

In the end the analysis of the results highlighted the internal conflict that the employer is experiencing in regards to the purpose of the learning activities. The use of economic drivers seems to be impacting participation based on the lack of clarity for making decisions about participation in learning activities. We do not have suspicious employees as was the case in Bratton's study (2001), we have confused employees. The employer publicly expresses the need to apply economic drivers to the decision-making process but in practice, still hesitates to define this more clearly and to come down hard on non-vocational learning. This is an interesting issue that has not surfaced in the literature specifically although the need to achieve a balance between the employer and the employees' needs has been raised (Bélanger & Robitaille, 2008).

#### 5.3.3.2 Decision ownership

If the employees do not seem suspicious of the employer or the supervisor's learning offer it does not mean that the tacit issue of power and decision ownership, as a result of the asymmetrical relationship between the parties involved, is lost on them. This is where the interview results showed a clash between employees and supervisors, and to some extent, between employees and the employer as well. Employees would like some ownership for the decision, especially when it comes to vocational and non-vocational learning activities related to future work. Ideally, according to the employees, they would be given a certain dollar amount per year, for which they would be the sole decision-maker. Any requests beyond this amount would then be the supervisor's responsibility to approve, based on a clear criteria set out by the employer. The latter being the only point

of consensus between employees and supervisors. Removing the subjectivity in the decision-making process would be the preference for both parties.

Of course the employees' suggestion and expectations do not take into account the fact that for as long as the employees are talking about an employer-sponsored learning activity, there is practically no way to remove the employer or the supervisor in the decision-making process since consideration and accountability for the organization's operations are most likely to always trump the employees' wishes. In addition, the proposed self-directed approach to making learning decisions and to spend a specific dollar amount each year assumes that all employees are able to identify and articulate their learning needs. This is likely not the case based on how the existing three professional development days are not used fully or consistently by all employees. Such an approach also begs for the employer and, or the supervisor to better track learning activity and pro-actively initiate the dialogue with employees who are not maximizing the learning resources of time and money provided to them.

We saw in the analysis of the results that participation and non-participation can both be used as a way, for all parties, to exercise control and power. This particular issue in the process may not lend itself to a direct solution but it absolutely needs to be acknowledged and reflected in the design of policies and procedures that guide the process of expressing demand for learning, and particularly, decision-making. Adding and using more formality to learning conversations has been considered an effective way of mitigating power issues and removing subjectivity (MacDonald & Hite, 2005). Increased institutionalization and systematization of the decision-making process should allow all parties to experience a sense of control in the process in order to ensure that

everyone remains engaged and perceives the outcome as beneficial. Currently, it is the covert manner with which each party is exercising control that is problematic and subject to a negative interpretation of the others' intent.

### 5.4 Summary of results, data analysis and findings

This chapter provided a comprehensive report, analysis and synthesis of the data collected for the purpose of this study. The results and the data analysis sections were presented and organized in a way that mirrored the research questions. In those sections it was established that the state of learning at the college closely reflected the trends reported in national and international surveys and all predictors of participation in formal and informal learning were replicated as well as the predictors of employer sponsorship. The research site and the population studied were therefore considered typical.

Within this typical group, atypical participants were identified and consequently interviewed in order to closely examine the antecedents to participation in learning activities. Through these interviews and an additional survey on the employer's learning performance, we were able to deconstruct the entire process preceding participation and investigate the interaction between the four key actors in the process: the employer, supervisors, the union and the employees. Artefacts were also analyzed to corroborate and further enlighten some of the interview results.

Through this analysis, it was possible to identify the key themes that emerged from the data: informality of the expression of demand through multiple channels, sometimes excluding the supervisors, the reliance on self-assessment, and the importance of the decision-making phase. These themes reinforced the fact that there are several

parties interacting during the process of expressing demand for learning and during decision-making. The details behind this interaction unveiled more of the complexity involved. The results on the expected state of the process, the factors that inhibit or facilitate the process and the roles of each stakeholder during the process revealed similar themes but provided additional insights into some of the current issues. This is particularly true for the issues related to the initiation of the dialogue to articulate the learning demand. By examining the expectations of each party, we uncovered a tacit desire by the supervisors and by the employees to have “the other” initiate the conversation.

The key themes were then discussed in relation to the research and knowledge gaps identified as the basis and context for this study. In this light, the misalignment between the employer and the employees’ profiles revealed some opportunities for the employer to address its institutional profile in order to better match the employees’ dispositional profile and thus be more likely to maximize the employer’s learning offer. The deconstruction of the antecedents to participation in learning activities provided insights along the same lines. Here there are opportunities for the employer, the supervisors and the union to better support the employees in the identification of their learning needs and the articulation of their learning demand by providing a more systematic, more formalized process with better tools. This would once again be a better match for the employees’ situational and dispositional profile. Finally, the discussion examined the impact of the economic drivers on the employees’ participation and concluded that even though the employees did not appear suspicious or deterred by the employer’s offer of learning, there are indeed issues of power in play. Those manifested

themselves mainly during the decision-making process, and in this regard, both the supervisors and the employees agree that a more formalized process would be beneficial as a way to mitigate the issue of asymmetry and the issue of ambiguity.

# CHAPTER 6

# CONCLUSION

# CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

One of the key desired outcomes of this study was to contribute insights and knowledge to the field of adult and workplace learning and to employers interested in increasing and widening the participation of their staff in employer-sponsored learning activities. Based on the analysis of the results and the discussion of the key findings, the objectives of this study appear to have been met. This chapter therefore brings the study to a close by offering a summary of the research, a description of the study's limitations, and a synthesis of the theoretical implications for the field of adult education and for workplace learning. The chapter then ends with a series of recommendations for employers, supervisors, unions and employees. It also reviews the knowledge gaps addressed and those remaining for future research.

## 6.1 Research summary

In the first chapter we explored how despite emerging economic pressures to increase and widen continuous employee participation in learning, and despite increased efforts towards employee learning in the workplace, trends in adult learning participation in Canada have not significantly changed for decades. We therefore established that there was a need to go beyond the already well-known learning predictor profiles of employees and employers and examine all the antecedents to employee participation in employer sponsored learning. This study set out to research such concepts among the support staff population in a large, urban community college in Ontario.

Through a review of the literature, we reiterated how the overall patterns of adults and employee participation in learning have remained fairly constant, in Canada and

abroad, over the last thirty years. These findings were found to be mirrored in the results of surveys examining the sponsoring practices of employers. We then synthesized the current knowledge on the antecedents to participation in learning and highlighted the reasons, the barriers, and the predictors of participation, as well as the process of expressing demand for learning, and other factors influencing participation such as employer-employee relationships and power. Of most interest was the fact that age, schooling, employment status, employer size and sector continue to be important factors determining future employee participation in learning. In light of such stable predictors and participation trends, research on the process that precedes participation as a way to further understand the factors that lead to participation has become relevant and useful.

In preparation for the data collection, a theoretical framework was developed based on the concept of the expression of demand for learning. This framework implies that there is a multi-step process involving interactions between several parties and wherein participation may be the outcome.

The design of the study included an initial survey among all support staff to establish their socio-demographic profile as well as their rate and type of participation in learning activities. Interviews were then conducted with an atypical group of employee participants, their supervisors, a representative of the union and with representatives of the college to provide the employer voice.

### *6.1.1 Limitations of the study*

The limitations of the study are related to the methodology adopted for the data collection, the type of instruments selected and the labour relations context in which the

study took place. The choice of methodology has meant that the findings have come from a snapshot in time provided by a small group of employees working for one employer. The findings have not been verified among a larger group nor has the study been duplicated at other employers or in other sectors. Consequently, the extent to which the implications and the recommendations can be generalized to other large employers are limited. However, the selection of the study site, the sampling method focusing on a specific, atypical group of learners, and the fact that the survey results showed this workplace and its employees to be behaving according to established predictor models, all contribute to making the findings worthy of considerations for other researchers and learning practitioners.

The two key instruments used for this study, the survey and the interview questionnaire, rely heavily on the respondents' ability to recall past learning activities. Moreover, the initial survey did not provide opportunities for prompting. This weakness is common among studies of this type but it is often mitigated by the ability for large research bodies to conduct such surveys by phone (Hui & Smith, 2003; Rubenson, 2001). Completing the survey in a self-directed manner, in the workplace, may have influenced participants to recall more formal, vocational learning activities.

The coincidental timing between the date of the survey launch and the date of the staff strike vote may have contributed to a low response rate to the survey. And although the intent was never to interview a large number of atypical participants, the interview sample (n=3) was smaller than intended in the design (n=5) as a result of the small respondent pool size. The tense labour relations environment may have also influenced

the extent to which the employer and the employees were critical of one another during the interviews.

### *6.1.2 Theoretical implications*

The findings of this study have implications for the field of adult education and workplace learning, particularly in regards to research methodology. We found that the use of mix methodology capturing the employer and the employees' voice was beneficial in providing new insights about the alignment between the offer and the uptake. The recognition of the antecedents to participation as a process involving several, multi-faceted actors allowed for the creation of a more detailed model useful for further research. The findings also reinforced the need for the field of adult education to continue to address issues related to the recognition of informal learning.

#### 6.1.2.1 The benefits of employer-employee comparative studies

The benefits of employer-employee comparative studies were made evident through this research. One of the key knowledge and research gaps that influenced the elaboration of this study pertained to the typical use of one-sided, one voice survey. For example, many studies have used adult education surveys to quantify, qualify and report on the employer's learning offer to the employees. Surveys that question employers do not specify whether the data they provide represent what they offered or what was utilized. Hui and Smith (2003) for example recommend that the AETS survey instrument be administered to employers as well in order to draw comparisons and observe whether participation patterns follow patterns in the employers' offer or vice versa. This knowledge and research gaps were recently recognized by Céreq (Lambert et al., 2009)

who conducted for the first time a combined analysis of an employer survey and an employee survey.

The method used for this study was slightly different because it did not survey the employer and then survey the employees. However, the employer, the union and the supervisors were interviewed and artefacts were collected in order to obtain a picture of the employer's offer which was then juxtaposed to the employees' participation in learning and perception of the employer's learning performance. This innovative approach proved useful in identifying the fact that the employer's offer was not maximized and that the employees' participation behaviour did not in fact represent the employer's sponsoring behaviours. There is learning left on the table, underutilized by the employees and the employers. This important finding confirms the need to shift our use of adult training surveys and our interpretation of the results.

#### 6.1.2.2 The antecedents to participation as a process involving with several, multi-faceted actors

The realization that there are important antecedents to participation in learning has been previously recognized and recommended as an area of study (Bélanger & Federighi, 2000). This study has taken this concept one step further and examined the antecedents as a process involving multiple actors. Doing so through a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods addressed issues and criticism previously reported in the review of traditional adult education and training surveys (Hui & Smith, 2003). This is because research in adult learning participation has heavily relied on quantitative surveys for many years. However, as emerging behavioural models and theories confirmed the complexity of participatory behaviours, the quantitative surveys continued

to leave gaps in knowledge. Similar to the need to combine the employer and the employees' voices into one study, the combination of qualitative methods to describe and deconstruct an interactive process as a way to explain quantitative results has proven to be beneficial. It allowed for a much greater level of detail and moved us closer to identifying root causes where interventions are possible.

Additional theoretical implications related to the framework include the need to integrate the traditional barrier typology with the predictor typology. This approach moves the focus away from the single concept of barriers and allows us to capture the fact that the parties involved in the process are multi-dimensional individuals whose traits can be categorized under three headings: situation, institution, and disposition (Figure 13, p.257).

*Figure 13. Capturing the multi-dimensional profile of one party by categorizing their traits using the traditional typology for barriers.*

Categorizing the various aspects of each party's profile in such a way could facilitate the study of the complex and dynamic entities they each represent. This approach can and should be applied to all parties (employee, employer, supervisors, union) entering the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making.

The findings also confirm that the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making is indeed an interaction between parties and should therefore be depicted and studied as such (Figure 14, p.258).

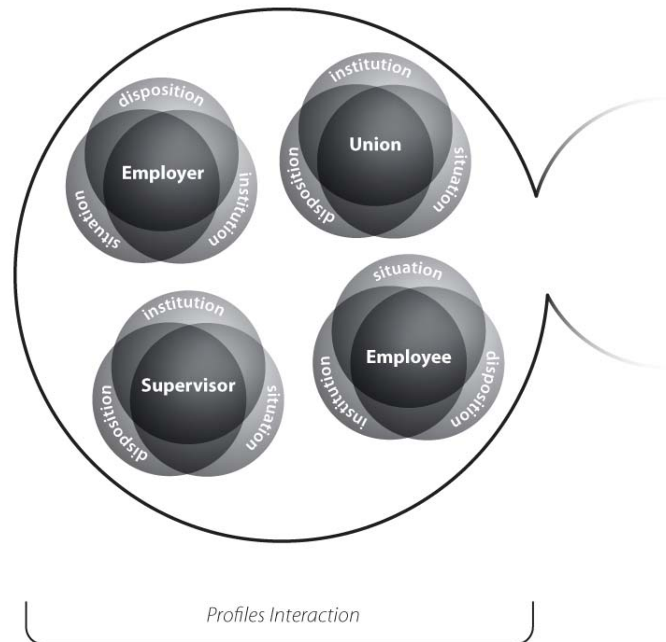


*Figure 14. The interaction between the multi-dimensional profiles of the parties involved in the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making.*

Within this interaction, issues of control and power are at play and it is best to acknowledge those while studying the process.

As for the process itself, it became evident that decision-making should be included as a distinct antecedent to participation in learning. Although most obvious in the context of workplace learning, it may be beneficial to include this step in all studies of antecedents to participation in learning. This distinction allows us to capture, in more detail, possible influences on the outcome that arise after the learning need has been

identified and the learning demand articulated. In other words, the more the process is deconstructed the more likely it is to capture where and what the facilitating or inhibiting factors are.

This has lead to a revised version of the theoretical framework for the antecedents to participation in employer-sponsored learning activities (Figure 15, p.260).

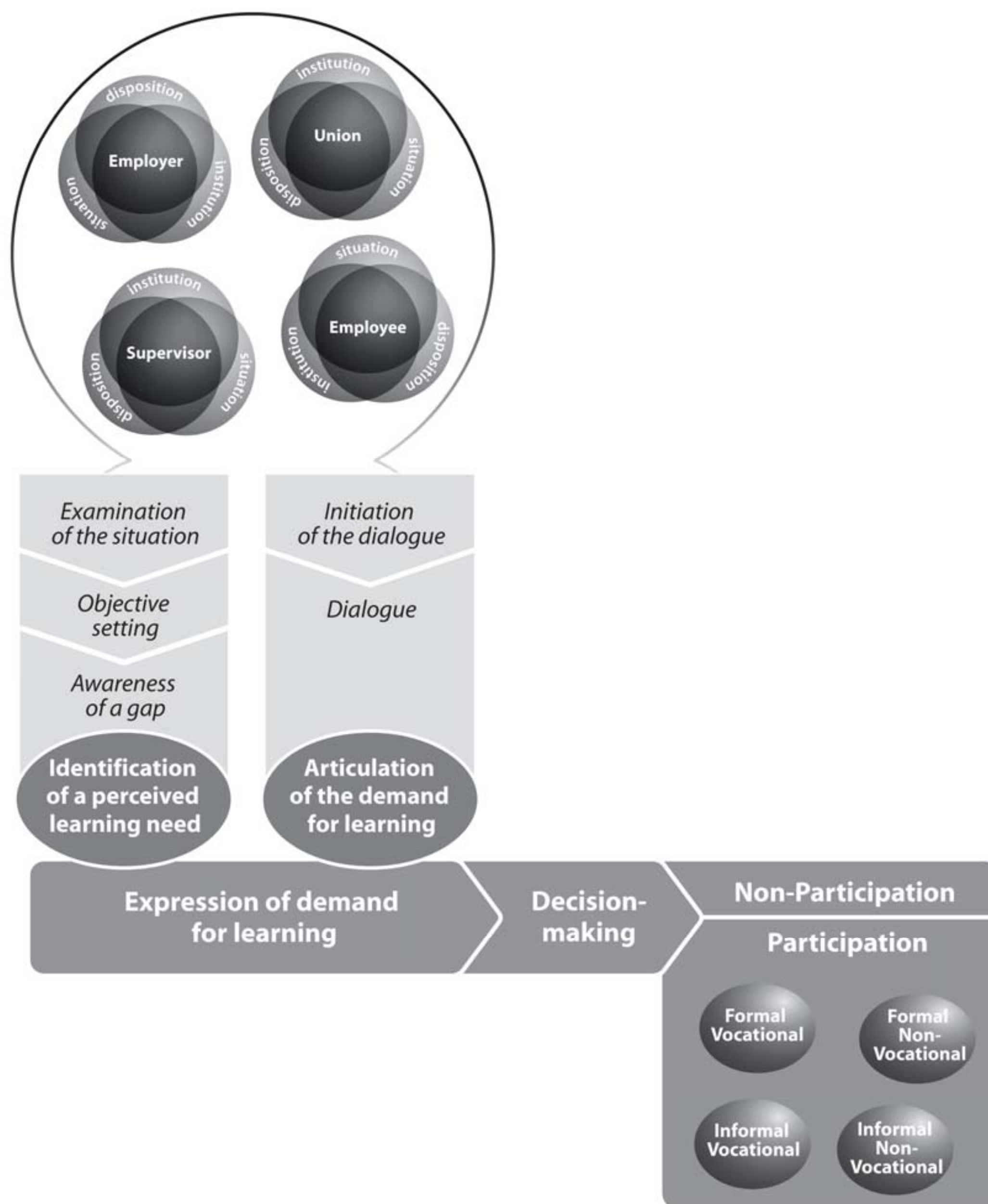


*Figure 15.* *Integrated version of the theoretical framework showing the expanded version of the process for expressing demand for learning and decision-making.*

This comprehensive, more detailed version of the theoretical framework includes the specific steps involved in the expression of demand for learning.

Overall, this study supports the need to focus on the antecedents to participation by considering all the elements “en amont” of the learning participation and by recognizing that there is indeed a process that takes place. The proposed model provides a good balance between the true complexity of the matter and the simplicity needed to study it in a manageable and practical way.

6.1.2.3 Recognition of informal learning

This study has once again surfaced important issues related to the recognition of informal learning. For the field of education, the recognition of informal learning is quickly becoming its holy grail. After decades of research and pilot projects on the topic, a very recent study conducted by the OECD in 22 countries reports that very little progress has been achieved in making recognition processes main stream, scalable or sustainable (Werquin, 2010). The OECD report confirms the seemingly unattainable need for better, more formalized, integrated policies, better communication and promotion and better tools. It also continues to justify the need for ongoing research efforts based on the human capital it can release for employers and the humanistic benefits for the adult. This is congruent with the findings of this study.

Perhaps a look at the antecedents to participation and the application of the model created for this study could provide a new lens from which to look into this perpetual dilemma. For example, the findings highlighted the role of the dialogue between the employee and the supervisor as a quasi pre-requisite for participation. Yet we also found that those conversations are not necessarily happening. If conversations about future learning are not happening, it is likely that conversations about past learning are not

taking place either. Is there a role for the dialogue in the process of expressing demand for learning to contribute to the process of recognizing informal learning? Is the dialogue component where the two processes intersect? Applying the expression of demand and decision-making model to future research on informal learning may provide new paths and lead to new solutions.

### *6.1.3 Recommendations*

Based on the results and the discussion of key findings there are several recommendations that can be considered if we are to affect the outcome of the process preceding employee participation in learning. Most of the recommendations pertain to the infrastructure that supports the process and therefore are largely targeted at the employer. However, as the employers consider the implementation of a more solid infrastructure and the use of more intervention methods, there are recommendations for unions, supervisors and for employees that can assist the employer in living up to its role and facilitate everyone's effective participation in the process. Those are discussed in this section.

#### 6.1.3.1 Recommendations for employers

The practical implications for employers pertain mainly to ways in which the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making can be improved in order to result into greater employee participation. By focusing on improving the process, the employer can in fact have an impact on the institutional and situational profiles of all the parties involved. And, by making the predictor profiles more prone to learning participation, there is a greater chance that the interactions between parties will be more conducive to the process taking place and will result in a positive outcome for everyone. The specific

places in the process where employers can make improvements are depicted and summarized in the figure below (Figure 16, p.263).

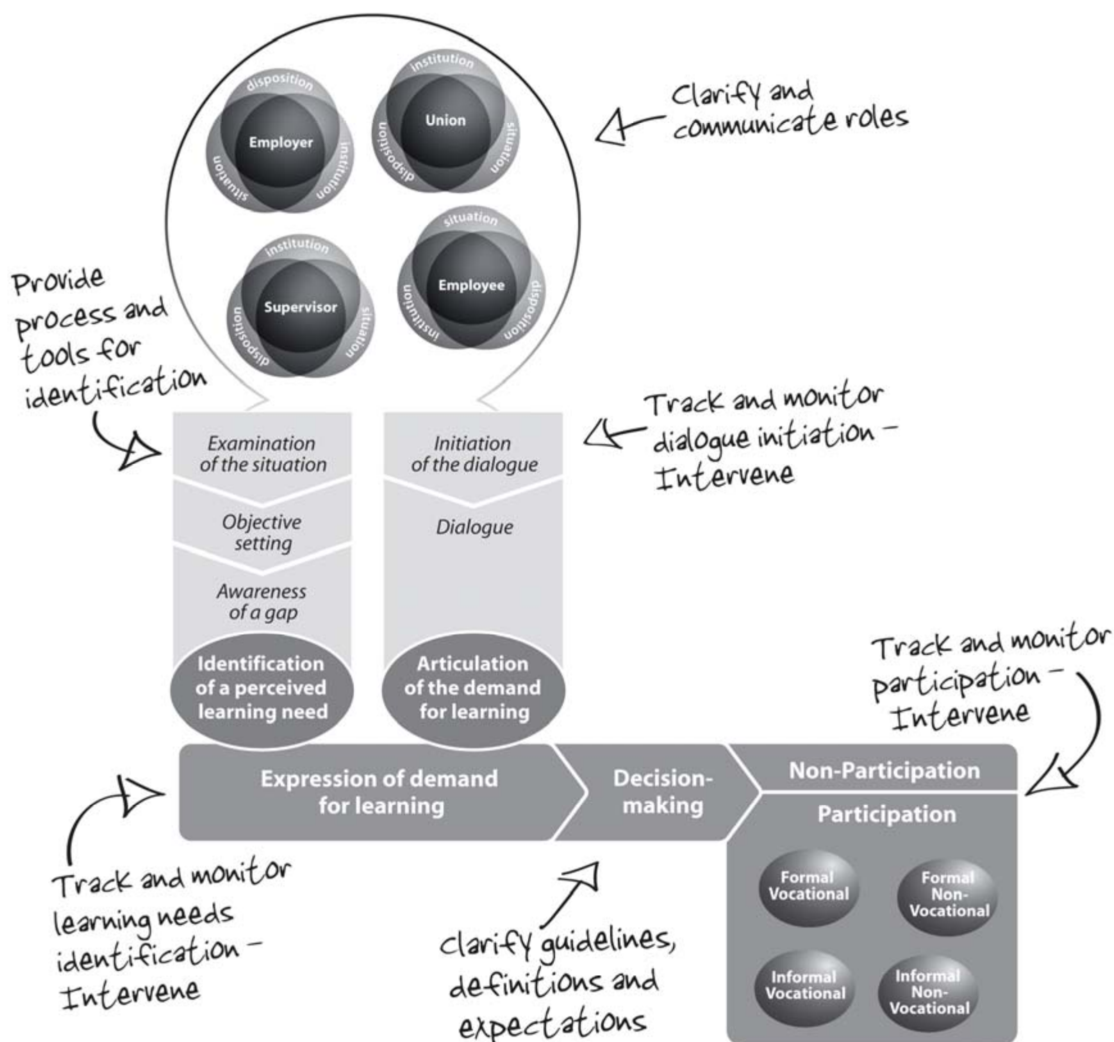


*Figure 16. Recommendations for the ways in which employers can improve the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making.*

These individual recommendations fall into three categories: clarity of roles with the provision of tools; clarity of guidelines, definitions and expectations; and tracking and

monitoring. Each category of recommendations is described in more detail in the sections that follow.

#### 6.1.3.1.1 Clear and explicit communication of roles

Probably the first step in improving the process with a high impact is for the employer to clearly and explicitly articulate and communicate the roles expected to be played by each party. The results of the *Learning Performance Index* showed that there was an important gap in perception between staff and the employer as far as the employer being a learning organization. The analysis indicated that this gap was likely attributable to a gap in communication on either or both sides and misalignment between the perceived employer offer and employee uptake.

We now know that what stands between the offer and the uptake is the process of expressing the demand and decision-making, including the interactions between the parties involved. Consequently, one way to close the communication and perception gap is to use the antecedents to participation model and to identify, for each step, the role of each party. This description could also be supported by tools and resources, links to policies and procedures and expectations of timelines and frequency. Using such a framework would be beneficial in many ways. It would bring awareness to the fact that there is an important and interactive process at play and it would be a vehicle for the employer to communicate expectations.

#### 6.1.3.1.2 Clear definitions, guidelines and expectations

Employers need to resolve the nebulous definition and varying interpretations of the term “professional development”. Clarifying the definition and providing guidelines

as to what ought to be included or excluded in professional development and how the decision ought to be made, by whom and based of what criteria would work to remove some subjectivity in the decision-making process. Clear guidelines add transparency, leave less room for interpretation, reduce the perceived power play of the supervisor and allow employees to take charge of their learning.

The employer also needs to state clearly what its expectations are of employees and supervisors. At the moment, it appears as though the employer has expressed that it values, encourages, supports, funds, and provides learning for staff. However, it is not clear what it expects to happen. Expected rates, types and results of participation have not been made explicit. Without clear expectations, there is no incentive or leverage for supervisors to be pro-active and, or to follow through on learning discussions. If managers were clear on the employer's expectations, they could take charge of their learning and the learning of their staff. Clear expectations also allow the employer to monitor and identify where the guidelines are not being applied and intervene appropriately. At the moment, most of the learning opportunities, with the exception of mandatory, legislated training, are offered in a passive way. The employer goes to great lengths to listen and respond to employees in regards to their learning needs. However, this approach only works for those who are willing and able to identify their learning needs and articulate a learning demand. It leaves those willing but unable, and those unwilling, without any consequences.

#### 6.1.3.1.3 Active tracking and intervention

With clearer role definition and with expectations clearly communicated, it becomes easier for all parties to self-regulate and to hold one another accountable for their specific responsibilities. However, in order to hold one another accountable, there has to be a form of tracking or documentation and the various steps of the process need to be recorded. Only then can there be an intervention to put the process back on course.

This is where the notion of joint accountability becomes clearly inappropriate. Only one party can be accountable for specific parts of the process. In this case, it would be advisable for the employer to take accountability for communicating clear guidelines, a clear process, as well as roles and expectations, and then to track the application of the process. When steps in the process are not taking place, the employer should be accountable for flagging the holes in the process and should hold supervisors accountable for addressing the issue.

Other parts of the process, such as proper methods for identifying learning needs can be supported and addressed through the development and implementation of tools and appropriate resources, including career and skills assessment tools.

### 6.1.3.2 Recommendations for unions, supervisors and employees

Once the employer provides the proper infrastructure, including tools, clarity of roles and decision-making criteria, the other actors can play a significant part in making this work. For unions, we have seen how the Union Learning Representatives in the UK were able to have a huge impact on increasing participation (Cedefop, 2003) and we also know that unions can have a positive influence on overall participation (Livingstone & Raykov, 2005). Based on the findings of this study, this influence could be exerted by

holding the employer accountable for putting the infrastructure in place and for tracking and monitoring the process. The union could easily request to see regular reports and contribute solutions when interventions are necessary. Moreover, the union who was successful in negotiating support for professional development, including three days per employee per year, should be concerned about this hard earned opportunity and offer to learn being left on the table by many of their members. The union should do its own examination of why that is, discuss barriers with members and remind, encourage members to make the most of it. In fact it makes perfect sense for the union to assist the employer in the communication of roles and expectations. The union does not have the same asymmetrical power relationship with the employees and their message of support and encouragement can be well received.

The same cannot be said of supervisors. Supervisors should therefore, first and foremost, acknowledge for themselves the limitations of the power relationship they have with their employees. By virtue of their position, they are in fact in the most difficult position to be having conversations about learning (Hughes, 2004). Bringing this awareness to the fore will perhaps prevent them from being reluctant initiators of the dialogue, realizing that employees may not be initiating the dialogue for reasons other than a lack of interest or motivation. Once the employer communicates the roles more clearly, supervisors will have to take accountability for assuming their role, particularly by ensuring that the learning conversations take place. Supervisors will therefore have to take responsibility for developing a trusting environment conducive to healthy, professional relationships with their employees.

If the employer provides the infrastructure, the union provides support and encouragement as well as interest in the untapped learning opportunities, and the supervisors initiate the dialogue, the employees will have to step to the plate as well. In this improved scenario, the employees have to be willing to be reflective about their learning and willing to take an active role in the conversation since it is supposed to be a dialogue. Similar to the union, if employees see or experience problems with the process they can be vocal to the union and the employer and actively seek and contribute to solutions for continuous improvement. In the end all actors can support the employees in their journey but it is the employees who will have to do the learning in an increasingly conscious and explicit way.

#### *6.1.4 Overcoming predictors of non-participation by affecting the process that precedes learning: future research*

To limit the study of employee participation in employer-sponsored learning to the practice of perfecting our forecasting method could be as frustrating and as useful as perfecting the art of forecasting the weather: it does not change the outcome. It does not bring rain during a punishing drought and it does not bring snow on a ski hill during the winter Olympics.

And, much like with the weather, there are many aspects of the employees, the supervisors, the union and the employer's profile that cannot be overcome or affected in any way to change an expected non-participation outcome into participation. However, there are several institutional and situational predictors in each of the party's profiles that are within their realm of control. More formal processes and tracking mechanisms, more systematic, centralized communication, the provision and utilization of tools, appropriate

interventions and recognition of learning are potential solutions that could turn our forecasting models into powerful, transformational tools to affect the seemingly stagnant rate of participation in employer-sponsored learning among Canadian workers. With such solutions potentially in reach, opportunities for further research quickly emerge.

For example, the concept of the "non-learning participant", in other words, employees who participate in employer-sponsored learning activities for reasons other than learning is an interesting concept worthy of further exploration. Within this concept, the issues of control and power seem to come into play in a more explicit way, particularly during the decision-making phase. A greater understanding of how power, control and learning are interconnected and how each actor uses and perceives this trilogy could further inform the antecedents to participation in learning.

Further research is also needed about the ways in which the employees' learning needs are identified. There are important limits associated with the employees' self-identification process and yet it appears to be a common way for employers, unions and supervisors to find out about their employees' needs. A more thorough investigation of best practices would be greatly beneficial since a recent literature review found few mentions of specific assessment tools being used as a mechanism to drive the career conversations (Butterfield et al., 2008).

It was also mentioned on several occasions that the concept of joint responsibility for initiating a process may be inherently flawed. A more in-depth study on this topic could serve to unpack and understand what might be beneath this deceptively noble attitude and behaviour on the part of each party. It is unclear at the moment why there is such an apparent level of consensus in accepting joint responsibility. Once again,

underlying issues of power and control may be beneath this attitude with each party perhaps not willing to concede control to the other. This reinforces the need to investigate issues of power, control and learning. In this regard, another recommendation for future research would be to continue to investigate the antecedents to participation and the interactions between the four actors by observing the parties in action. In addition to asking each party to retell, from their perspective, how the learning demand was expressed and how the decisions were made, this approach would record and analyze actual exchanges between parties. This would greatly enrich the data and continue to unpack the layers of complexity surrounding the interactions. This study has clearly demonstrated the benefits of paying attention to the antecedents to participation via the study of the process preceding the decision. Consequently, research that would continue in this direction, in greater depth, would be useful.

## 6.2 Conclusion

In the end, the prospect of having realistic, feasible solutions for affecting the outcome of the process preceding participation in learning is cause for optimism. These potential solutions for increasing and widening learning in the workplace appear to lie in the infrastructure supporting the process of expressing demand for learning and decision-making. The idea to focus on infrastructure, formality and systems, it was discussed, is not entirely new. However, this research was able to zoom in and begin to identify more specifically the types of infrastructure that might be beneficial, where to add formality and how to implement systems that mitigate some of the barriers affecting the process of expressing demand for learning and more importantly, the outcome. Considering the

objectives of this study and the knowledge gaps driving this particular research, this is a positive conclusion. However, it is difficult to ignore the fact that this conclusion appears quite paradoxical in light of the strong penchant for informal learning among workers. At what point does the process preceding learning become so formal that it begins to look and feel a lot like formal learning, the very type of learning that does not appear to be the method of choice for many groups of employees? This dilemma, combined with the seemingly irresolvable issues surrounding the recognition of informal learning, behoves us to perhaps reframe the problem altogether.

If participation in learning is largely influenced by socio-cultural dispositions shaped in many ways by initial formal learning, it may be necessary to take the problem outside of the learning realm altogether. When looking at what made the employees who participated in this study atypical, and what allowed them to overcome the predictors of non-participation, we see that it was largely how driven they were by a personal aspiration which happen to involve learning. In that sense, perhaps these individuals are not atypical after all. Aspirations, in fact, may be the common ground that all parties have in common. Employers and supervisors have aspirations of a high performing, successful organizations. Unions have aspirations of respect, dignity and fairness for all their members. Employees have aspirations as unique as their own individual journey: advancement, retirement, health, financial stability, social contribution…. And the list goes on. So, what if the infrastructure provided by the employer was designed to ensure that all parties have conversations about their respective aspirations? What if we did not mitigate power issues by formalizing informal learning but by having parties clearly

articulate their aspirations and then discuss how each can mutually contribute to the other's aspirations in an interdependent relationship?

In light of the extent to which participation in learning is already happening and the issues of underemployment we are already facing, perhaps the initial motive and thrust behind this study, the urge to increase and widen employee participation in learning activities, needs to be reconsidered. The risk of learning being easily tainted by issues of power and control is too high in our current competitive, economic environment. Consequently, if the intent is to ultimately maintain some of the early emancipatory, humanistic goals that were originally behind adult education and later on, workplace learning, while being realistic about the need for organizations to meet economic performance goals, perhaps we ought to take the conversation outside of the learning circle and discuss mutually disclosed aspirations, the realization of which may or may not involve learning. By not focusing on learning, it may be easier to guarantee that learning will take place and that a greater level of conscious competence will be attained and utilized by all if the parties are actually having uninhibited conversations that do not necessarily involve discussing weaknesses and performance gaps within the confines of an asymmetrical relationship – just aspirations. Trying to neutralize a power-based relationship may not be realistic. Attempting to neutralize the topic of conversation might be. Moreover, formalizing the conversation process and its outcomes may not only become more feasible than recognizing all learning, it may also be more universally palatable as a means to help everyone achieve the outcome they desire. Such an accomplishment would be quite welcome.

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# APPENDICES

*Appendix 1. Announcement memo to all full-time support staff at the college*

*(inter-office mail version)*

To: All Full-Time Support Staff

From: [redacted]

Re: Support Staff Survey on Participation in Learning

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The college and the union have jointly agreed to participate in a research project being conducted by an external researcher (a doctoral student) interested in employee development.

The study will examine the process that precedes the participation of support staff employees in the learning activities provided by the college in order to understand the role each plays (employee, supervisor, union, college) as well as the factors and the conditions that help or hinder participation.

We believe that the results of this study will help us identify ways to ensure we are doing our best to support your access and participation in learning activities.

We would like to encourage you to participate in this research.

Participating in this study is voluntary. It involves:

- Responding to a questionnaire about your participation in a variety of formal and informal learning activities. This will take between 30 and 45 minutes and you will be given time to complete the survey during work hours.
- If selected (5 support staff, 5 supervisors, 4 college representatives), you will be invited to meet with the researcher for a one-hour interview. This interview will be at your work site, during your work hours, at a time convenient for you.

Participation is voluntary and all responses will be kept strictly confidential. Only the researcher will see the raw, individual data.

You will receive a formal invitation to the research project, with a link to the survey, in the next week. In the meantime, if you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact either [redacted] or [redacted].

*Appendix 2. Invitation to participate in study*

To: All Full-Time Support Staff

From: Dominique Giguere, Researcher and PhD Candidate

Re: Support Staff Survey on Participation in Learning

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As per the announcement sent to you last week, please find below the link to the employee learning survey.

Once again we encourage you to participate by clicking on the link below. You will have a chance to review all the details of this project and give your consent before the survey begins. It will take you approximately 30 minutes.

We thank you in advance for your time and interest and we look forward to sharing the results with you. Let us know if you have any questions.

www.employeelearningsurvey.com

*Appendix 3. Survey Participation Consent Form (paper version)*

# Employee Learning Survey

Welcome to the employee learning survey. To continue, please read the following consent form.

**Research Title** : Participation in employer-sponsored learning activities among Ontario college support staff

**Researcher** : Dominique Giguère, PhD Candidate, Université de Montréal

## A) INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS

**Research objectives**
This project seeks to examine the process that precedes the participation of support staff employees in the learning activities provided by the college. This is to help understand the role of each stakeholder (employee, supervisor, union, college) during this process as well as the factor and the conditions that inhibit or favour participation.

**Participation**
Participating in this study is voluntary. It involves:
* Responding to this questionnaire about your participation in a variety of formal and informal learning activities.
* If selected (5 support staff, 5 supervisors, 4 college representatives), you will be invited to meet with the researcher for a one-hour interview. This interview will be at your work site, during your work hours, at a time convenient to you.

**Confidentiality**
Please note that your responses are strictly confidential. Each participant will be assigned a number and only the researcher will know to whom the number has been assigned. Moreover, all data will be kept in locked cabinets, in a locked office. All personal data will be destroyed 7 years after the completion of the project. Only non-personal data may be kept beyond that time.

**Advantages and disadvantages**
By participating in this research, you will contribute to our collective knowledge on best practices that could enhance, increase and widen employee access to learning opportunities. You may also benefit from the chance to reflect on your own level of learning activity. Based on the confidential nature of the research, there are no anticipated disadvantages.

**Right to withdraw**
Your participation is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no prejudice or justification. If you decide to withdraw, you can do so by contacting the researcher at the email or phone number below. If you withdraw, all data collected to date, pertaining to you, will be destroyed.

**Inquiries**
For any information on this study or to withdraw, please contact Dominique Giguère, at ██████ or at ██████████

Any complaint related to your participation in this study can be addressed to the ombuds office at ██████ or at ██████████. The ombuds person will take collect calls.

**B) CONSENT**
I have explained the purpose, nature and advantages of this study and I have answered all questions to the best of my knowledge.

Name: Dominique Giguère, External Researcher

*I have read the above and have obtained all needed clarification. I understand the purpose, goal, advantages and parameters of my participation. I freely consent to take part in this survey and I know that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without prejudice or justification. I agree to the data being collected and used for the purpose of this study and for subsequent research projects, with appropriate approval from an ethics committee, under the same confidentiality and data protection principles.*

❒ **I ACCEPT**

Please proceed to answering the questions on the next page. Thank you.

❒ **I DECLINE**

Please return the survey in the pre-addressed, stamped enveloped enclosed. Thank you.

*Appendix 4. Learning Profile Survey*

Adapted from the U.K.'s 2002 National Adult Learning Survey (Fitzgerald et al., 2003)

**SECTION I. PERSONAL INFORMATION:**

**Q.1 Job Title**

What is your job title: ______________________

**Q.2 Job classification**

What level is your job classification (A to L)?

____________

**Q.3 Relationship with supervisor**

How would you rate your relationship with your immediate supervisor?

- ❒ High level of trust, respect, support and understanding
- ❒ Sufficient level of openness and support
- ❒ Neutral, neither good or bad
- ❒ Low level of trust, respect support and understanding

**Q.4 Gender**

What is your gender?

- ❒ Female
- ❒ Male

**Q.5 Age**
How old are you?

- ❒ 16 - 24
- ❒ 25 - 34
- ❒ 35 - 44
- ❒ 45 - 54

❒ 55 - 64

❒ 65 – 74

**Q.6 Living arrangements**

Does anyone regularly live with you?

❒ YES → Continue to question **# 7**.

❒ NO → Skip question #7. Go to question **#8**, next page.

**Q.7 Persons living with you**

Who else regularly lives with you? **(Check all that apply)**

❒ Husband / wife / partner / boyfriend / girlfriend

❒ Son / daughter

❒ Stepson / stepdaughter / child of partner

❒ Foster child

❒ Son-in-law / daughter-in-law

❒ Parent

❒ Step-Parent

❒ Foster parent

❒ Parent-in-law

❒ Brother / sister (incl. adopted)

❒ Step-brother / sister

❒ Foster brother / sister

❒ Brother / sister-in-law

❒ Grandparent

❒ Ex-husband, ex-wife or ex-partner

❒ Other relative

❒ Other non-relative

**Q.8 Disabilities or Health problems**

Do you have any disabilities or health problems that you expect will last for more than a year?

❒ Yes

❒ No

**Q.9 Highest level of education completed**

What is the highest level of education you completed?

- ❒ Did not complete a diploma
- ❒ High School diploma or its equivalent
- ❒ Certificate
- ❒ College Diploma
- ❒ Degree
- ❒ Post-Graduate Degree
- ❒ Other Academic professional qualification (specify) _______________
- ❒ Other Professional Certification (specify) ___________________

**Q.10 Education location**

Where did you complete this level of education?

- ❒ Canada
- ❒ Other (specify)

**Q.11 First language**

What is your first language?

- ❒ English
- ❒ French
- ❒ Other (specify) __________________

**SECTION II. PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING**

The next questions are about courses, workshops or seminars you might have done in the past 12 months, and where there was a teacher or a facilitator.

**Q.12 Formal Learning**

In the last 12 months, have you participated in any learning such as courses, workshops or seminars where there was a teacher or facilitator?

❒ Yes → Continue to next question.

❒ No → Skip the next few questions. Go to question **#32**

**Q.13 List of courses, workshops or seminars**

Please list all courses, workshops or seminars that you can remember taking in the last 12 months, where there was a teacher or facilitator.

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

**Q.14 Course relation to job**

Were some of these courses, workshops or seminars related to your job?

❒ Yes → Continue to next question

❒ No, they were all for my own interest. → Skip to question **#16**.

**Q.15 List of courses related to job**
Please list which courses, workshops or seminars were related to your job?

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

**Q.16 Selection of one course for further questions**

Of all the courses, workshops or seminars you just listed in question #13, please select ONE.

______________________

**Q.17 Mode of delivery**

What was the main mode of delivery for this course?

- ❒ Face-to-face
- ❒ Distance
- ❒ Other (please specify) _______________

**Q.18 Type of learning activity**

Was the learning...

- ❒ Formal = I received a grade and / or the instructor evaluated my learning
- ❒ Non-formal = I received no grade, there was no assignment or test or any other evaluation recorded

**Q.19 Time spent**

How much time did you spend on this course, workshop or seminar, **in total**, during the last 12 months?

- ❒ 1 to 8 hours
- ❒ 9 to 35 hours
- ❒ More than 35 hours

**Q.20 Status of learning activity**

Did you complete it?

- ❒ Yes, I completed it
- ❒ I abandoned
- ❒ It's still in progress

**Q.21 Course location**

Where did you participate? **(Check one - most relevant)**

❒ At a school / college / university / adult education centre / Institute

❒ The workplace

❒ Training or Job Centre

❒ Community Centre

❒ Leisure, club, sports centre

❒ Driving school

❒ Public Library

❒ Learning Resource Centre

❒ Own home, with tutor

❒ Other (please specify) ______________________

**Q.22 Organizer**

Who organized and provided this course, workshop or seminar? **(If more than one, select the main organizer).**

❒ My Employer

❒ Union

❒ Professional Organization

❒ Job Centre

❒ Religious College

❒ Charity or volunteer group

❒ Community College

❒ College or University

❒ Adult Education Institute, Learning Centre

❒ Other (specify)

**Q. 23 Who paid**

Who paid for your participation?

❒ There was no fee

❒ Fee paid by my employer

❒ Fee paid by me

❒ Fee shared between my employer and me

❐ Other (specify): ________________________

**Q.24 Participation timing**

When did you participate?

❐ During work hours

❐ During my own time

❐ Shared between my own time and work hours

**Q.25 Help received**

Did anyone help you, in some way, with this course, workshop or seminar? **(Check all that apply)**

❐ Yes, Family and / or friends

❐ Yes, Colleagues

❐ Yes, Supervisor

❐ Yes, Instructor

❐ No one helped me → Skip the next question. Go to question **#27** on the next page.

**Q.26 Type of help received**

What kind of help did you receive? **(Check all that apply)**

❐ Provided materials

❐ Provided funding, financial help

❐ Transportation

❐ Child care

❐ Help with the content of the activity / additional explanations

❐ Other

**Q.27 Guidance before sign up**

Before signing up for this course, workshop or seminar did you receive any information or guidance to help you make your decision? **(Check only one - the most important source of information and guidance):**

❒ Family, friends or work colleagues

❒ School, college, university, adult learning centre

❒ My employer

❒ Union

❒ Public Library

❒ Community Centre, volunteer college

❒ Job Centre

❒ Television, radio, newspaper, magazine, yellow pages

❒ Internet

❒ Other (specify)

❒ No information or guidance received → Skip the next question. Go to question **#29.**

**Q.28 Contact for guidance**

When you received this information or guidance, was it because:

❒ You contacted them first

❒ They contacted you first

**Q.29 Reason for participation**

Why did you participate in this course, workshop or seminar?

❒ It's compulsory for my job → Skip the next few questions and go to question **#32**.

❒ It will help my current job → Continue to next question

❒ It will help me with a future job → Continue to next question

❒ It's a personal need or interest → Skip the next question and go to question **#31**

**Q.30 Course related to your job**
If this learning activity is related to your job but is **NOT** compulsory, what was your main motivation? **(Check only one – your top choice)**

- ❒ Get a new job
- ❒ Develop my career
- ❒ Change to a different type of work
- ❒ Gain new skills for my job
- ❒ Stay in my job, that I might have lost without this learning
- ❒ Get a pay raise
- ❒ Get a promotion
- ❒ Get more satisfaction out of my work
- ❒ Set up my own / family business
- ❒ Help me with work programs related to my health problem(s) or disability
- ❒ No reason
- ❒ Other (specify) ______________________

NOW SKIP THE NEXT QUESTION. GO TO QUESTION **#32**.

**Q.31 Course NOT Related to your Job**
If this learning activity is NOT related to your job, what was your main motivation? **(Check only one - your top choice)**

- ❒ Do something interesting
- ❒ To find out about this subject
- ❒ To improve my knowledge, ability in this subject
- ❒ Gain a qualification
- ❒ Start another course
- ❒ Make new friends, meet new people
- ❒ Do something with my spare time
- ❒ Have some fun
- ❒ Keep my body active
- ❒ Get involved in voluntary or community activities
- ❒ Help my children with their school work
- ❒ Help me with my help problem(s) or disability
- ❒ No reason
- ❒ Other (specify) ______________

**SECTION III. INFORMAL LEARNING**
The section earlier asked you about courses, workshops or seminars that were taught by teachers or facilitators.

In this section, we will ask you about learning that was **NOT** taught. It is learning that you did **WITHOUT** a teacher, instructor, professor, or facilitator, and where there was no evaluation.

**Q.32 Informal learning on the job**

Please give example(s) of things (topics, skills) you have learned from your supervisor or colleagues, during the last 12 months.

______________________________________

______________________________________

______________________________________

❒ No topics

**Q.33 Improving knowledge**
In the past 12 months, have you deliberately tried to improve your knowledge about anything, teach yourself any type of skill, or study for a qualification by yourself?

❒ Yes → Continue to next question, **#34.**

❒ No → Skip to Section IV, question **#48**

**Q.34 Learning activities without a teacher or facilitator**

Please give example(s) of learning activities that you did without a teacher or facilitator, in the past 12 months. What topics or skills did you learn?

______________________________________

______________________________________

______________________________________

**Q.35 Selection of one informal learning activity**

Of all the learning activities you just listed, please select ONE:

_______________________

**Q.36 Learning mode**

What is the main mode of learning you used for this learning activity?

- ❒ Books, manuals
- ❒ Internet
- ❒ Family, friends, colleagues, supervisor as guide
- ❒ Trial and error
- ❒ Other

**Q.37 Time**

How much time did you spend on this topic, **in total**, during the past 12 months?

- ❒ 1 to 8 hours
- ❒ 9 to 35 hours
- ❒ More than 35 hours

**Q.38 Status of learning activity**

Did you complete this learning activity?

- ❒ Yes - new skill acquired
- ❒ No - abandoned
- ❒ No - in progress

**Q.39 Learning activity location**

Where did you do this learning? **(Check one - most relevant)**

- ❒ The workplace
- ❒ Training or Job Centre
- ❒ Community Centre
- ❒ Leisure, club, sports centre
- ❒ Public Library
- ❒ Learning Resource Centre
- ❒ Own home
- ❒ Other (specify) __________________

**Q.40 Fees for learning activity**

Were there fees associated with this learning? (eg. materials, membership...)

- ❒ No fee
- ❒ Fee paid by my employer
- ❒ Fee paid by me
- ❒ Fee shared between my employer and me
- ❒ Other (specify) _______________________

**Q.41 Participation timing**

When did you participate in this learning activity?

- ❒ During work hours
- ❒ During my own time
- ❒ Shared between my own time and work hours

**Q.42 Help with activity**

Did anyone help you, in some way, while you were working on this learning activity?
**(Check all that apply)**

- ❒ Yes, Family and / or friend
- ❒ Yes, Colleagues
- ❒ Yes, Supervisor
- ❒ No, no one helped me → Skip the next question. Go to question **#44**.

**Q. 43 Type of help received**

What kind of help did you receive from this person(s)?

- ❒ Provided materials
- ❒ Provided funding, financial help
- ❒ Transportation
- ❒ Child care
- ❒ Explanations about topic
- ❒ Other (specify) _______________

**Q.44 Information received**

Did you receive any information or guidance that helped you decide to start this learning? Who was the **main** source of information?

❒ Family, friends or work colleagues

❒ School, college, university, adult learning centre

❒ My employer

❒ Union

❒ Public Library

❒ Community Centre, volunteer college

❒ Job Centre

❒ Television, radio, newspaper, magazine, yellow pages

❒ Internet

❒ Other (specify)________________

❒ No information or guidance received

**Q.45 Reason for participation in learning activity**

Why did you take up this learning activity?

❒ It's compulsory for my job → Skip to section IV, question **#48**

❒ It will help my current job → Continue to next question #46

❒ It will help me with a future job → Continue to next question #46

❒ It's a personal need or interest → Skip the next question. Go to question **#47**

**Q.46 Activity related to job**

If this learning activity is related to your job but is NOT compulsory, what was your main motivation? **(Check only one - your top choice)**

- ❒ Get a new job
- ❒ Develop my career
- ❒ Change to a different type of work
- ❒ Gain new skills for my job
- ❒ Stay in my job, that I might have lost without this learning
- ❒ Get a pay raise
- ❒ Get a promotion
- ❒ Set up my own / family business
- ❒ Help me with work problems related to my health problem(s) or disability
- ❒ No reason
- ❒ Other (specify) _______________________

**Q.47 Activity NOT related to job**

If this learning activity is NOT related to your job, what was your main motivation? **(Check only one - your top choice)**

- ❒ Do something interesting
- ❒ To find out about this subject
- ❒ To improve my knowledge, ability in this subject
- ❒ Gain a qualification
- ❒ Start something new
- ❒ Make new friends, meet new people
- ❒ Do something with my spare time
- ❒ Have some fun
- ❒ Keep my body active
- ❒ Get involved in voluntary or community activities
- ❒ Help my children with their school work
- ❒ Help me with my health problem(s) or disability
- ❒ No reason
- ❒ Other (specify) _________________________

## SECTION IV. CONSENT TO BE CONTACTED

After everyone has completed the survey, 5 employees will be contacted for an interview. The interview will be one-hour long. It will be at your workplace, during work hours, at a time and location convenient to you.

**Q.48 If you are selected, please indicate your preference.**

❐ I do not wish to be contacted for an interview

❐ I agree to be contacted to be considered for an interview. My name is:

__________________________

*Please note that only the researcher will know your name and only the researcher can contact you or see your responses.* ***Confidentiality is guaranteed.***

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME.**

**YOUR PARTICIPATION IS GREATLY APPRECIATED.**

*Appendix 5. Interview Consent Form*

Research Title : Participation in employer-sponsored learning activities among Ontario college support staff

Researcher *:* Dominique Giguère, PhD Candidate, Université de Montréal

A) INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS

Research objectives

This project seeks to examine the process that precedes the participation of support staff employees in the learning activities provided by the college. This is to help understand the role of each stakeholder (employee, supervisor, union, college) during this process as well as the factor and the conditions that inhibit or favour participation.

Participation

Participating in this study is voluntary. It involves responding to a questionnaire about organizational learning and participating in this interview.

Confidentiality

Please note that your responses are strictly confidential. Each participant will be assigned a number and only the researcher will know to whom the number has been assigned. Moreover, all data will be kept in locked cabinets, in a locked office. All personal data will be destroyed 7 years after the completion of the project. Only non-personal data may be kept beyond that time.

Advantages and disadvantages

By participating in this research, you will contribute to our collective knowledge on best practices that could enhance, increase and widen employee access to learning opportunities. You may also benefit from the chance to reflect on your own level of learning activity. Based on the confidential nature of the research, there are no anticipated disadvantages.

Right to withdraw

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no prejudice or justification. If you decide to withdraw, you can do so by contacting the researcher at the email or phone number below. If you withdraw, all data collected to date, pertaining to you, will be destroyed.

Inquiries

For any information on this study or to withdraw, please contact Dominique Giguère, at [redacted] or at [redacted]

Any complaint related to your participation in this study can be addressed to the ombuds office at [redacted] or at [redacted]. The ombuds person will take collect calls.

B) CONSENT

I have read the above and have obtained all needed clarification. I understand the purpose, goal, advantages, parameters of my participation. I freely consent to take part in this project and I know that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without prejudice or justification. I agree to the data being collected and used for the purpose of this study and for subsequent research projects, with appropriate approval from an ethics committee, under the same confidentiality and data protection principles.

Yes_________ No___________

Signature : ___________________________________ Date :

Name: _________________________________________________

I have explained the purpose, nature and advantages of this study and I have answered all questions to the best of my knowledge.

Yes_________ No___________

Signature : ___________________________________Date:

Name: _________________________________________________

*Appendix 6. Learning Performance Index*

Adapted from the Conference Board of Canada, *Learning Performance Index*, with permission (Conference Board of Canada, 2006)

Instructions

Under the six sections that follow, please respond to each statement as it relates to your college. For each multiple-choice question, circle the answer that best describes how your college operates, from your point-of-view.

1 = strongly disagree  2 = disagree  3 = agree  4 = strongly agree

**VISION: The extent to which learning is part of the vision of the organization**

1. Senior management clearly communicates that learning is critical to the college's success.

1 2 3 4

2. Senior management regularly communicates the college's strategic direction and business goals.

1 2 3 4

3. Senior management clarifies the nature and levels of knowledge that are most important to the college.

1 2 3 4

4. Senior management demonstrates support for learning by serving as learning role models for the college.

1 2 3 4

5. The college builds an alignment of visions across different levels, departments/faculties, and work groups.

1 2 3 4

6. Managers and employees share a common vision of what their work should accomplish.

1 2 3 4

**INFRASTRUCTURE: The systems and procedures in place to support learning**

7. The college supports knowledge in concrete ways, e.g., funding, policies, resources, systems, technology.
   1 2 3 4

8. Learning and knowledge sharing is recognized and rewarded through specific measures in the college
   1 2 3 4

9. Important knowledge is formally *captured and stored*, e.g., databases of lessons learned, directories of key people, bulletins, help-line, etc.
   1 2 3 4

10. Important knowledge is *easily accessible* to people who need and use it, e.g., databases of lessons learned, directories of key people, bulletins, help-line, etc.
    1 2 3 4

11. The college provides opportunities for employees to learn by working on challenging assignments.
    1 2 3 4

12. The college prepares employees to undertake new work assignments by providing opportunities to enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities.
    1 2 3 4

13. The college continues to develop new strategies for learning throughout the college.
    1 2 3 4

14. Employees are encouraged to continuously upgrade and increase their knowledge and education level.
    1 2 3 4

15. Employee learning is emphasized equally at all levels in the college.
    1 2 3 4

**CULTURE: How the culture in the college supports learning**

16. People feel free to challenge the way things are done in the college.
    1 2 3 4

17. People are encouraged to share knowledge in the college.
    1 2 3 4

18. Risk taking is actively encouraged and supported in the college.
    1 2 3 4

19. The college continually provides learning opportunities to meet changing skill requirements.
    1 2 3 4

20. The college provides opportunities for employees to communicate with other staff about successful programs or work activities in order to understand why they succeed.
    1 2 3 4

21. The college encourages people to view problems in their work as opportunities to learn.
    1 2 3 4

22. Failures are constructively discussed in the college.
    1 2 3 4

23. Senior managers in the college actively support change.
    1 2 3 4

24. Managers in the college frequently involve employees in important decisions.
    1 2 3 4

**LEARNING DYNAMICS: The extent to which learning is at the core of how you operate.**

25. Individuals are trained and coached to develop their capacity to learn.
1 2 3 4

26. Individuals and teams learn from reflection on their successes and failures.
1 2 3 4

27. Individuals and teams apply learning from their successes and failures to their future actions.
1 2 3 4

28. The college monitors outside trends by looking at what others do, e.g., by benchmarking "best practices," attending conferences and examining published research.
1 2 3 4

29. The college actively seeks input from stakeholders (both internal and external) to improve its services.
1 2 3 4

30. Managers both support and take on the roles of coach, mentor, and facilitator of learning.
1 2 3 4

31. The college provides opportunities for people to learn by doing.
1 2 3 4

32. In the college, it is easy to form informal groups to solve problems.
1 2 3 4

33. New work processes that may be useful to the college as a whole are usually shared with all employees.
1 2 3 4

**INVESTMENT: The extent to which the college invests in learning and development**

34. Does the college have a policy on job-related learning?
    - Yes
    - No

35. Over the past year, has your college invested in employee training or learning?
    - Yes
    - No

36. If yes, does the policy articulate how many hours of job-related learning are allocated per employee?
    - Yes
    - No

What percentage of all employees are **eligible** to receive formal, job-related learning?
- 100%
- 80%–99%
- 50%–79%
- 0%–49%

37. What was the total number of days of formal, job-related learning you received in the last 12 months?
    - 5 days
    - 4–5 days
    - 2–3 days
    - 1–2 days

38. Does the college offer any coaching or mentoring opportunities?
    - Yes
    - No

39. Does the college enable employees to attend conferences, seminars, or workshops?
    - Yes
    - No

*Appendix 7. Interview Questionnaire - Support Staff version*

Part I – Learning Participation Map

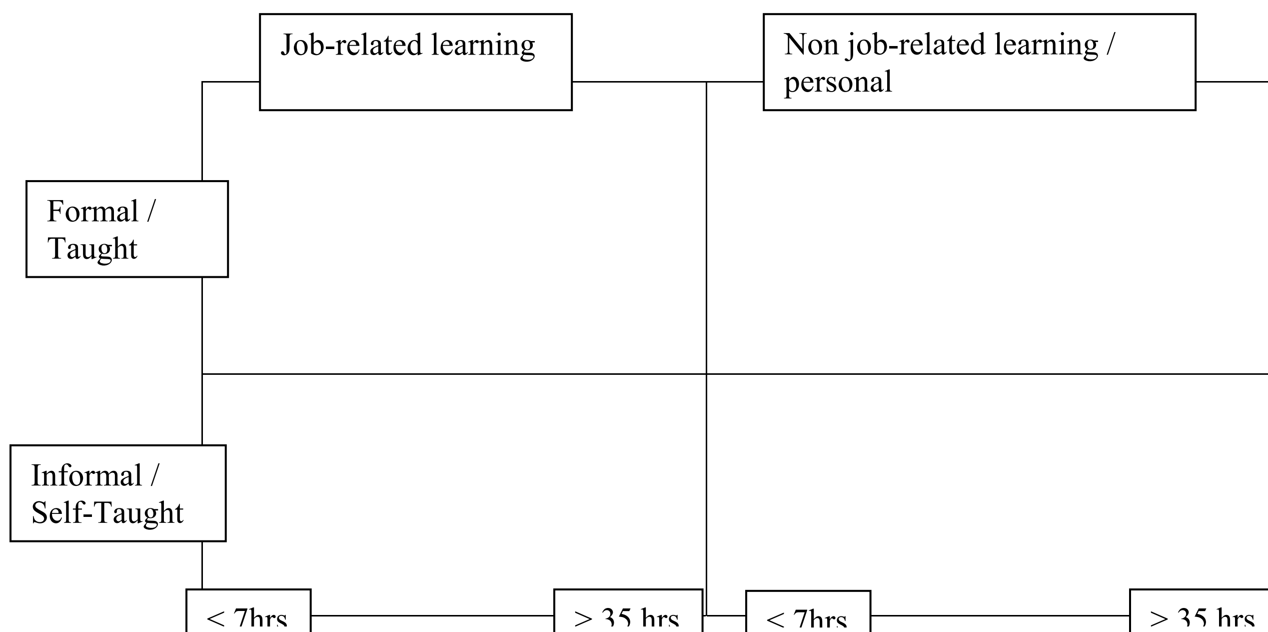
*[This is an interview protocol – The interviewer will assist the interviewee in completing this chart]*

INSTRUCTIONS:
Please take a moment to map your learning activities of the last 12 months on this grid.

Use subject or topic to indicate what you were learning.

Use left – right direction to indicate the intensity / duration of the learning

Circle any of the activities where your college was involved or linked to the learning somehow: time, money, need for job, request etc…




1. Select one activity linked to your college.

____________________________________

2. Tell me the story of how your participation in this learning activity came about: [Let initial response flow from interviewee]

[Elaborate]

a) Who took the initiative for your participation in this learning?
    I. Did the need or desire come from you?
    II. Was it a demand or suggestion from your supervisor? (specify which)
    III. Was there a particular, specific situation that triggered this?

IF THE NEED WAS IDENTIFIED BY OTHERS

3. If this need did not initially come from you, had you, yourself felt the need or an interest?

4. Were your own learning needs taken into consideration when making this decision

5. How were you approached?

6. Was the process easy, difficult?

7. What made it easy, difficult?

8. What were the objectives of this learning activity?

9. Did you have any concerns, worries or fears prior to starting this learning activity?

10. Did you express those?

11. Were they addressed? If yes, how, why? If not, why not?

12. What was this decision based on?

13. What policies, guidelines, were used in this process, if any?

14. Is this how things happen, typically? To what extent is this example representative of how your learning needs are identified, expressed and acted upon?

IF EMPLOYEE WAS THE INITIATOR, ASK THE FOLLOWING **INSTEAD**:

15. What process did you undertake to identify and express this learning need?
16. To whom did you express this need?
17. Was the process difficult?
18. What made it easier? What made it difficult?
19. What were your objectives or hopes when you made the decision?
20. Did you have any concerns, worries or fears prior to starting this learning activity?
21. Did you express those? To whom?
22. Were they addressed? If yes, how, why? If not, why not?
23. What was this decision based on?
24. What policies, guidelines, were used in this process, if any?
25. Is this how things happen, typically? To what extent is this example representative of how your learning needs are identified, expressed and acted upon?

PART II – EXPECTATIONS

[re-examining the learning scenario discussed above]

26. If you could change the process you experienced, what would you change?

[spontaneous answers first]

[expand or specify]

27. Who should identify learning needs?

28. Who should initiate the conversation (the expression) of those needs?

29. Who else, if anyone, should be involved in this process?

30. What learning needs should be acted upon? By whom?

31. What else, if anything, should be involved, eg. Policies, guidelines, forms etc…

32. Who should make the final decision?

33. What should the decision be based on?

34. What would make this process easier, more effective for you?

35. When it comes to identifying, expressing and acting upon the learning needs of support staff, in your opinion, what is the role of

    a. The college?
    b. The supervisor?
    c. The employee?

*Appendix 8. Logistic Regression Report*

| | |
|---|---|
| Page | 1 |
| Response | FORMAL |

**Run Summary Section**

| **Parameter** | **Value** | **Parameter** | **Value** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dependent Variable | FORMAL | Rows Processed | 190 |
| Reference Group | NO | Rows Used | 94 |
| Number of Groups | 2 | Rows for Validation | 0 |
| Frequency Variable | None | Rows X's Missing | 96 |
| Numeric Ind. Variables | 0 | Rows Freq Miss. or 0 | 0 |
| Categorical Ind. Variables | 3 | Rows Prediction Only | 0 |
| Final Log Likelihood | -60.80879 | Unique Row Patterns | 33 |
| Model R-Squared | 0.31288 | Sum of Frequencies | 94 |
| Actual Convergence | 1.011423E-07 | Likelihood Iterations | 4 |
| Target Convergence | 0.000001 | Maximum Iterations | 20 |
| Model D.F. | 7 | Max Like Message | Normal |
| Completion | | | |
| Model | CLASS\|AGE\|EDU | | |

**Response Analysis Section**

| **FORMAL Categories** | **Count** | **Unique Rows** | **Prior** | **Act vs Pred R-Squared** | **% Correctly Classified** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| NO | 54 | 17 | 0.57447 | 0.06754 | 75.926 |
| YES | 40 | 16 | 0.42553 | 0.06754 | 37.500 |
| Total | 94 | 33 | | | 59.574 |

**Parameter Significance Tests Section (Reference Group: FORMAL = NO)**

| **Parameter** | **Regression Coefficient (B or Beta)** | **Standard Error** | **Wald Z-Value (Beta=0)** | **Wald Prob Level** | **Odds Ratio Exp(B)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| B0: Intercept | 0.25567 | 0.76721 | 0.333 | 0.73895 | 1.29133 |
| B1: (AGE ="35-44") | -0.20394 | 0.57142 | -0.357 | 0.72117 | 0.81552 |
| B2: (AGE ="45O") | -0.84568 | 0.55106 | -1.535 | 0.12487 | 0.42926 |
| B3: (CLASS ="HST") | 0.35003 | 0.97826 | 0.358 | 0.72049 | 1.41911 |
| B4: (CLASS ="MLS") | -0.53454 | 0.79621 | -0.671 | 0.50200 | 0.58594 |
| B5: (EDU ="DM") | 0.45148 | 0.49655 | 0.909 | 0.36323 | 1.57064 |
| B6: (EDU ="HSL") | 0.01386 | 0.66680 | 0.021 | 0.98342 | 1.01395 |

*Appendix 9. Learning Performance Index: Detailed interpretation scale*

Vision

**Score of 21 or more *Level 4* (High Level of Performance)**

An effective systemic approach is in place that is fully responsive to the multiple requirements in this area. Learning is viewed and clearly communicated as an essential part of the organization's success, and employees are made aware of how their development and learning are connected to the success of the organization.

**Score of 18–20 *Level 3* (Strong Level of Performance)**

A systemic approach is in place that is moderately responsive to the multiple requirements in this area. More effort is required to ensure that learning is viewed and clearly communicated as an essential part of the organization's success and employees understand how their development and learning are connected to the success of the organization.

**Score of 14–17 *Level 2* (Fundamental Level of Performance)**

The beginning of a systemic approach to the basic purpose of this area is evident. Organizations at this level are generally reactive to problems rather than continuously striving for improvement. Major effort is required to ensure that learning is viewed and clearly communicated as an essential part of the organization's success and employees understand how their development and learning are connected to the success of the organization.

**Score of 13 or less *Level 1* (Basic Level of Performance)**

There is little/no evidence that a systemic approach to the basic purpose of this area is used. Substantial effort is required to ensure that learning is viewed and clearly communicated as an essential part of the organization's success and employees understand how their development and learning are connected to the success of the organization.

Infrastructure

**Score of 32 or more *Level 4* (High Level of Performance)**

An effective systemic approach is in place that is fully responsive to the multiple requirements in this area. The organization supports learning in concrete ways, and employees have continuous learning and development opportunities.

**Score of 27–31 *Level 3* (Strong Level of Performance)**

A systemic approach is in place that is moderately responsive to the multiple requirements in this area. More effort is required to ensure that the organization supports learning in concrete ways and employees have continuous learning and development opportunities.

**Score of 22–26 *Level 2* (Fundamental Level of Performance)**
The beginning of a systemic approach to the basic purpose of this area is evident. Organizations at this level are generally reactive to problems rather than continuously striving for improvement. Major effort is required to ensure that the organization supports learning in concrete ways and employees have continuous learning and development opportunities.
**Score of 21 or less *Level 1* (Basic Level of Performance)**
There is little/no evidence that a systemic approach to the basic purpose of this area is used. Substantial effort is required to ensure that the organization supports learning in concrete ways and employees have continuous learning and development opportunities.

Culture
**Score of 32 or more *Level 4* (High Level of Performance)**
An effective systemic approach is in place that is fully responsive to the multiple requirements in this area. The organization encourages employees to be adaptable, curious, and independent and to feel free to challenge established ways of operating.
**Score of 27–31 *Level 3* (Strong Level of Performance)**
A systemic approach is in place that is moderately responsive to the multiple requirements in this area. More effort is required by the organization to encourage employees to be adaptable, curious, and independent and to feel free to challenge established ways of operating.
**Score of 22–26 *Level 2* (Fundamental Level of Performance)**
The beginning of a systemic approach to the basic purpose of this area is evident. Organizations at this level are generally reactive to problems rather than continuously striving for improvement. Major effort is required to ensure that the organization encourages employees to be adaptable, curious, and independent and to feel free to challenge established ways of operating.
**Score of 21 or less *Level 1* (Basic Level of Performance)**
There is little/no evidence that a systemic approach to the basic purpose of this area is used. Substantial effort is required to ensure that the organization encourages employees to be adaptable, curious, and independent and to feel free to challenge established ways of operating.

Learning Dynamics
**Score of 32 or more *Level 4* (High Level of Performance)**
An effective systemic approach is in place that is fully responsive to the multiple requirements in this area. Continuous learning is at the core of how staff operates, and practices are in place to support both formal and informal learning. In addition, effective systems and structures exist to ensure that knowledge is captured and managed and staff can easily find the information and knowledge required to operate.
**Score of 27–31 *Level 3* (Strong Level of Performance)**
A systemic approach is in place that is moderately responsive to the multiple requirements in this area. More effort is required to ensure that continuous learning is at the core of how staff operates and practices are in place to support both informal and formal learning. Systems and structures exist to ensure that knowledge is captured and managed and staff can generally find the information and knowledge required to operate.

**Score of 22–26 *Level 2* (Fundamental Level of Performance)**
The beginning of a systemic approach to the basic purpose of this area is evident. Organizations at this level are generally reactive to problems rather than continuously striving for improvement. Major effort is required to ensure that continuous learning is at the core of how staff operates and practices are in place to support both formal and informal learning. Basic systems and structures may exist to capture and manage knowledge; however, it may be difficult for staff to find this information.

**Score of 21 or less *Level 1* (Basic Level of Performance)**
There is little/no evidence that a systemic approach to the basic purpose of this area is used. Continuous learning is not at the core of how staff operates, and few practices (if any) exist to support continuous learning in either formal or informal settings. Generally, systems and structures do not exist to capture and manage knowledge. Substantial effort is required.