



Devaluing Learning by Mandating Continuing Education

Originally posted to www.alwaysdoneitthatway.com on June 28th, 2006

I had an encounter with an individual over a decade ago that made a lasting impression. I was describing to her a tool that would assist her in objectively determining her learning needs, developing a learning plan and guiding her to appropriate learning resources in her area of practice. After agreeing that the tool seemed valuable, she indicated that perhaps she would buy it next year when she starts a new recertification cycle because she doesn't need any more hours this recertification cycle. What? Rather than spend \$65 on a learning tool that could help prioritize her learning pursuits and locate relevant learning activities, she declined because she had already fulfilled her required learning quota.

Unfortunately, this isn't an isolated incident. For many fields with certification, the accompanying mandated continuing education (MCE) has devalued learning. The effects are widespread and the negative ramifications of MCE can be found throughout adult learning literature. Here are just a few:

- One concern is relevancy. Professionals become overly concerned with "getting their hours" and because usually only the traditional education delivery modes are acceptable (conferences as the most common example), they are essentially forced to participate in activities that are convenient or affordable but sometimes irrelevant to their needs.
- Another concern is that MCE devalues many types of learning, especially those types that are more informal and self-directed. Since these activities, such as reading, receiving mentoring, or conferring with colleagues are not usually accepted as acceptable learning activities under an MCE system, individuals may question the value of these approaches and assume the traditional approaches are better.
- Another criticism of MCE is that it creates a punitive attitude towards learning. For those professionals who would regularly engage in learning with or without the mandate, MCE becomes punitive in that it places sanctions on activities that are already occurring. And, for many, it forces them to participate in activities they otherwise wouldn't simply to meet the requirement.

Am I suggesting we scrap all mandated CE? No. But the systems need to change. For one, we should eliminate or at least lessen the excessive judgmental and limiting rules of MCE. Before creating any rule (deeming some learning methods acceptable and others not, limiting amount of time spent in one type of activity, requiring participation in certain types of activities, etc), ask yourself: Does this rule help professionals learn or does it actually hinder learning?

The bottom line: we want certificants to be competent. To be competent, they must engage in continuous learning. But, the truth is that we cannot mandate that someone learns. And, it's time we realized that requiring "butts in seats" at our conferences is a limited and ineffective approach. Far more effective an approach is to make a concerted effort to foster the value of continuous learning and to provide tools and guidance to professionals to help them be more effective learners.

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