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# 21st Century Learning Ecosystem Opportunities: Research and Findings with Kathy Harris

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*Welcome to PDXPLORES, a Portland State Research podcast featuring scholarship, innovations, and discoveries, pushing the boundaries of knowledge practice and what is possible for the benefit of our communities and the world.*

My name is Kathy Harris, and I am the director of the Literacy Language and Technology Research Group in the Department of Applied Linguistics. My research interests focus on the language and literacy skills, including digital literacy skills that people need for work, learning, health, and other life needs. In particular, I focus on adults who are learning English as well as adults who have foundational skills gaps. In other words, individuals who struggle with the reading and writing skills needed for 21st Century life.

The 21st Century Learning Ecosystem Opportunities, or [21 CLEO Research Project](#), is a collaboration between the Literacy, Language and Technology Research Group in the Department of Applied Linguistics at Portland State University and the Ed Tech Center at World Education. A team of four researchers included myself, Dr. Gloria Jacobs, Dr. Jill Castek, and Dr. Jen Vanek. The 21 CLEO Project was launched to increase understanding of the complexities of the learning ecosystem... ecosystems in employer supported education and training initiatives.

You can think about employer supported education and training initiatives as the learning opportunities that some employers offer to their employees. This can be everything from an employer hosting an in-house English language program, to an employer partnering with a workforce organization or a community college who offered training or classes. Or to the employer offering online classes through a third party like Guild Education or Open Sesame, and everything in between.

Employers want to know more about who does and does not participate in these learning opportunities. For employers, offering learning opportunities are a way to increase retention of their employees and to increase the number of frontline workers who move into supervisory or management positions. We found that employers and

workforce systems lack a broad view of frontline workers; what their goals, needs, and preferences are.

One of our goals in this project was to center the voices of frontline workers in our research. We used the term "working learners" to highlight the fact that our participants are both workers and learners at the same time. Our research envisions workplace learning as ecosystems shaped by a constellation of factors that operate in dependent and independent ways. We use the term "learning ecosystem" to describe how different components interact within a learning environment. A learning ecosystem includes working learners, employers, educators, technologies, curricula, policies, et cetera. It can get much more specific than that, but those are some of the general elements in the learning ecosystems that we looked at.

The overarching goal of the 21 CLEO Project was to examine the factors that influenced 21st Century learning ecosystems, the working learners who can and can't participate in them, and to help open up more opportunities for frontline working learners to develop their skills and knowledge. We wanted to look at how learning opportunities can better support success on the job and lead to a strengthened capacity to engage with others and continually learn. We also wanted to raise up and center voices of working learners whose voices had been missing from discussions of employer supported education and training initiatives.

Our research design was iterative in the sense that we built in ways to adapt our study based on the findings that emerged in each phase. We had four phases of our work. First, we conducted a landscape scan of the different elements of learning ecosystems related to employer supported education and training initiatives. We looked at referee published articles, as well as gray literature, like web published reports. Second, we recruited participants to interview. Our participants came from across the country and were working in different sectors, including retail, food service, healthcare (like home healthcare aids), transportation, pharmacy, and electronics recycling. Third, we used multiple rounds of data analysis, starting with inductive coding and then priority codes

from the literature and descriptive statistics. Based on our learnings from this initial round of analysis, we went back and interviewed some participants again to dig in deeper to some of the questions we had. We ended up interviewing some people three to four times over a two year period. Fourth, from the beginning, we had intended to include participants in our study as research partners. We wanted to arrange activities that gave voice to people who would be impacted by the work, including working learners and others in the learning ecosystem, such as workforce development staff, educators, employers, and researchers.

We held a series of three convenings each with a different focus. The first convening focused on the persona that we developed. The second convening focused on results revealed by the analysis of our data conducting... conducted using critical race theory. The third focused on a learning ecosystem with attention to worker voice in that ecosystem. The discussions in the three sets of convenings helped show us how our initial research insights resonated or did not resonate with these learners and interested parties. We synthesize the discussions from the convenings, which encouraged us to go back into our data with new questions.

A challenge of presenting what we learned about working learners was the need to describe them as more than a single archetype, a depiction we found common in articles and reports. Each working learner is unique, with respect to their goals and preferences, prior education and access to learning opportunities. To represent the variety of learners, we created six persona. Each persona is a composite description, which supports the transferability of our findings. Each persona was built through an empirical qualitative process and represents many participants. Each persona is a story that illustrates a broader perspective and describes a type of working learner participating in an employer supported education and training initiative. And each persona includes not only characteristics of multiple working learners, but also how they like to learn and their goals.

Discussion in our convenings helped us to see that the persona that we developed would be useful to employers, human resources personnel, workforce development staff, education designers, and education providers. Knowing more about different types of working learners helps to design learning opportunities in ways that meet different needs and support different learners. Several theoretical perspectives informed our research. First, cultural historical activity theory (or CHAT: a theoretical lens used to understand the organization and impact of systems on human behavior) provided us with insight into how working learners and key stakeholders articulate and perceive their experiences within a learning ecosystem.

Based on our emerging findings, and on the racial reckoning in the summer of 2020, we added another theoretical perspective, Critical Race Theory, which provided a way to reveal the under-the-surface tensions that shape employer supported learning opportunities. Critical Race Theory is a well established body of work in law and education. It is not a fringe theory, nor does it live in the ivory towers. When we centered working learners within a learning ecosystem and used Critical Race Theory, we moved beyond simple narratives and revealed many layered identities of working learners. We were able to see that individuals bring a great deal of experience and knowledge to the learning opportunity and to their employment, no matter what languages they speak, where they come from and what work they do. Not only did using two theoretical perspectives allow us to see things in our data that we hadn't seen before, it also created the opportunity for theoretical triangulation.

Our data analysis revealed that working learners skills, experiential knowledge, learning mindset, language, flexibility, and knowledge gained from previous learning experiences were not consistently acknowledged by employers. We found contrasting examples of working learner experience showing how proactive effort on the part of a supervisor can help learners overcome institutionalized inequities or how absent that support learning does not lead to advancement. The analysis illustrates how endemic racism exists within education and training initiatives and in workplace learning, despite the best efforts of individuals involved in delivering learning opportunities.

As we talk to working learners across the country, we notice patterns in who participated in these learning initiatives and who benefited from them. We shared these findings in blog posts, discussing which working learners get recruited to participate in education and training initiatives, and which do not. This led us to some recommendations to the field. We found that employers need to recognize working learner's education and training efforts, and to make connections to advancements opportunities clearer. There needs to be clear paths for advancements about progress along the way. Working learners told us that they didn't see the relationship between participating in a learning opportunity and some kind of career advancement. It is important to create conditions that support the retention of skilled frontline workers through relevant education and training that leads to advancement. It's important not to essentialize working learners. No two learners are the same. They have unique needs, goals and desires. The data show us that working learners are agentic. They make decisions based on their unique characteristics and their unique circumstances, and they should be given choices that best meet their needs, goals and desires. Working learners are also self efficacious. Each individual has the capacity to learn and all learning as a growth process. Finally, because of the unique needs and preferences of working learners, education providers and employers need to listen to learner's desires and goals and design learning with their needs in mind, rather than presenting "one size fits all" programming.

My name is Kathy Harris, and my research involves both understanding the skills needed for 21st Century life and how these findings and social action can support equity.

Thank you for listening to PDXPLORES. If you liked what you heard on this episode, please read and follow the show anywhere you get your podcasts.