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Maurice C. Taylor
University of Ottawa, Canada

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Partners in the Transfer of Learning: A Qualitative Study of Workplace Literacy Programs

Maurice C. Taylor
University of Ottawa, Canada

Abstract: *This study investigated the common types of transfer strategies used by the key stakeholders in 11 Canadian workplace education programs. Results indicated that the Role Time Model was a useful classification system: to understand the dimensions of a transfer partnership; to document the transfer of learning strategies and to identify the barriers influencing the transfer of learning.*

Introduction

At first glance, the notion of transfer of learning seems very straightforward and simple. However, it is a highly complex concept to investigate, measure and demonstrate. Taylor (1998) refers to the transfer of learning in workplace literacy programs as the educational component of the economic search for the return on investment. It is more concerned with the learning process, the workplace as a learning context and the application by trainees of new knowledge and skills gained through a learning activity. Within this frame, the present study attempted to unravel some of the questions related to enhancing the process of transfer.

In the context of the workplace, transfer of learning is defined as the effective application by trainees to their jobs of the knowledge and skills gained as a result of attending an educational program. (Cormier & Hagman, 1987; Broad, 1997) It occurs when learning in one context or with one set of materials impacts on performance in another context or with other related materials. From a theoretical point of view, transfer of learning occurs whenever prior learned knowledge and skills affect the way in which new knowledge and skills are learned and performed. When later acquisition or performance is facilitated, transfer is positive. When later acquisition or performance is impeded, transfer is negative. Simply put, transfer of learning is often referred to as the "So What?" or "Now What?" phase of the program planning process.

In one of the first critical reviews on the training transfer literature, Baldwin and Ford (1988) pointed out that there is a growing recognition of a transfer problem in organizational training. It is estimated that while North American industries annually spend over one hundred billion dollars in training and development, not more than 10% of these ex-

penditures actually result in transfer to the job. Researchers have similarly concluded that the amount of training conducted in an organization fails to transfer to the work setting (p. 63). As sponsors of workplace literacy programs demand more concrete and useful results, it is essential that a concerted plan be developed for helping participants apply what they have learned.

The Role and Time Model of Learning Transfer

In terms of a classification system that addresses the various factors influencing the transfer of learning, Broad and Newstrom (1992) developed a Role and Time Model which depicts three key roles – instructor, trainee, supervisor and three training time periods – before, during and after. This transfer matrix assists in the understanding of who are the people responsible for the transfer of learning and when are the right times to support transfer. Each of the nine cells in the matrix contains a wide range of teaching strategies, learning strategies and support strategies.

Using this classification system as a developing framework, the purpose of the study was to examine the different roles in a transfer partnership and the time periods in a training program that support transfer. Specifically, the study sought to identify the common types of transfer strategies used by the instructors, trainees and supervisors and the barriers that keep trainees from applying newly learned skills to their jobs. A broad range of workplace literacy programs across Canada was studied.

Methodology

The research strategy of this exploratory study was qualitative. This approach seemed suitable, given the complexity of the transfer concept. Through a National Advisory Committee, 11 workplace liter-

acy programs were purposely selected, based on four criteria. Programs selected for the study were from the manufacturing, utilities, service, mining, health, and natural resources sectors. As well as representing the various occupational sectors, these programs also represented the different regions of the country and models of program delivery.¹

Participants for the study were recruited from three different types of program stakeholders – the instructor, the trainee and the workplace supervisor. Interview schedules were¹ developed for each of the three groups of stakeholders based on the transfer of learning literature and interviews with experts from North America. For each of the 11 sites, two or three instructors affiliated with the program and four to six trainees presently or previously involved in a program were interviewed. One workplace supervisor currently on the shop floor was also interviewed from each program. Over 90 participants provided information for the investigation. Content analysis using a constant comparative technique was used to determine the common types of transfer strategies and barriers to the transfer of learning. The basic procedure used consisted of four strategies outlined by Strauss (1987). Validity was enhanced through the use of an independent panel of graduate students in adult education who verified the classification system of transfer strategies by role and time period.

Presentation of Results

Role and Time Combinations in Learning Transfer

Given the rich description of each of the workplace programs through the use of three different types of interview schedules, it was possible to determine if transfer of learning had occurred. Based on the data, instructors, trainees and supervisors reported that transfer of learning was evident within each of the 11 workplace literacy programs. However, there were certain role and time combinations of transfer strategies reported by each partner that were more frequently used in these programs. Because of the volume of data collected, simple frequency counts were calculated on interview questions that pertained to who and when transfer strategies were used. The results of these frequency counts enabled a set of rankings which appear in Table 1.

In examining the role-time combinations, the highest (1) and the lowest (9) rankings fall within the role of the instructor during and after the program. Instructors reported that they had made the most significant effort to support transfer while delivering the program. Most often because of contractual arrangements with the employer, they left the organization once a program had been completed, leaving few doors open to support the learning transfer of trainees once they returned back to their jobs.

Table 1 – Role Time Combination for Using Transfer Strategies

Role	TIME PERIODS		
	Before	During	After
Instructor	2	1	9
Trainee	5	3	4
Supervisor	7	6	8
Key: 1 = high; 9 = low			

The rankings of 3, 4, 5 are associated with the role of the trainee. For the most part, trainees felt that they had made good attempts to apply what they had learned by engaging in transfer strategies during, after and before the program in that sequence. These rankings seem to support the idea

that trainees recognize the need to work together with instructors to increase the likelihood of learning transfer. The lowest rankings (6, 7, 8) fall within the role of supervisor. On the surface, these rankings seem to indicate that supervisors are not supportive of the need for learning transfer, how-

ever this is somewhat contrary to what the supervisors reported. Generally, they want to be supportive but because of work environment circumstances outside of their control, it is very difficult. Many barriers to using transfer strategies exist in this role-time combination.

Partners in the Transfer of Learning

In the more complete study write-up (see Taylor, 2000), each stakeholder profile is described and accompanied by the key transfer of learning strategies that were most commonly used. Because of the page limitations here only a partial text of the role of the instructor is presented. This is intended to give a flavour of the results. A summary chart of all transfer strategies for instructors, trainees and supervisors will be distributed in the conference session.

The Role of the Instructor

Before a program begins, one of the key steps for the instructor in the transfer of learning process was to identify "what" is to be transferred. Most of the instructors felt that a good starting point for this type of identification was the information already gained through tools such as the individual assessment, oral reading and writing samples, workplace needs assessments, pretests and job task analyses. As one instructor replied, "How I figured out what needed to be transferred was based on the questionnaire that my participants completed prior to the beginning of the program. They themselves told me what they wanted to transfer or needed to improve on in order to perform better on the job or to increase their chances at applying for a newly created position."

Instructors also found that the implementation of a variety of contextual teaching techniques during a workplace program had a lasting effect. For example, many instructors encouraged transfer by linking the program content to real examples in the learner's work or home life. In several cases, instructors simulated the kind of meeting that would take place on the shop floor with trainees by practicing minutes writing, or making motions and asking for information clarification. Other instructors used the actual operating manuals when a new piece of equipment arrived to present lessons on its different parts and functions. In this way, new terms and phrases were introduced using a situated learning approach.

There was also a general consensus from instructors that once a program had been completed, the evaluation results became a powerful tool for understanding how and when the transfer of learning had taken place. When a program was offered more than once at a company, then these evaluation results became instrumental in fine tuning transfer strategies. As one instructor indicated, "It helps to determine which teaching strategies work best and produce transfer to the learners' jobs and to their lives." Different evaluation methods for gaining insights into the transfer process included such tools as open ended learner and supervisor interviews, statistics tracking forms, check lists and weekly group feedback sessions using transfer objectives as the focus for discussion.

Barriers to the Transfer of Learning

As much as transfer of learning was evident according to instructors, there were also barriers or inhibitors. These barriers could be described under four major categories: organizational, programmatic, lack of support and learner attitude. The first two categories are briefly presented here. Some instructors felt that the organizational climate can influence how well trainees actually transfer knowledge, skills and attitudes back to the job. If there was poor communication between the employer and the employees, or if there was a general low morale in the workplace or if people were not being encouraged, then these factors effected how much learning was transferred. As one instructor put it, "Transfer is related to whether an organization is really a learning organization. If it is consistent in its commitment to helping employees learn, if confidentiality is respected, if there are internal systems to encourage promotion, and if there are mechanisms in place that reward people for knowledge, then it can happen." In some programs, instructors also mentioned that the organizational restructuring at the workplace and the consequent alternation of positions was not clear to employees. This resulted in learners not knowing whether they should practice their new skills back on the job.

Program elements such as the length of the session, the size of the class, location and time of day or night can all act as barriers to the transfer of learning. Some instructors reported that before any kind of transfer can take place, enough practice time has to be allotted during the class time; this was not always the case. As one instructor said, "If

the learners end up working overtime and miss their class, it means less practice time for them – it just doesn't happen.” Others mentioned that large class sizes make it difficult to attend to specific objectives and to “really see if they are applying the new technical information back on their jobs.” One instructor claimed that “the biggest barrier to transfer is when the learning program is off-site. Learning should be done on the site, during working hours. This would make transfer of learning much easier and more enjoyable. Students and employees would see improvements faster, both in work and in self-esteem.”

Discussion and Implications

This study has attempted to illustrate how a Role Time Model can be used to understand the different dimensions of a transfer partnership in workplace education. Secondly, it has described some of the common transfer strategies that have been implemented by instructors, trainees and supervisors across a variety of basic skills programs. Thirdly, a number of significant barriers influencing the transfer of learning have been identified which shed some light as to why trainees are not always able to apply newly learned skills to their jobs. Together these findings have implications for practice in workplace literacy and for further research in the area of transfer.

The organizing structure for this investigation was based on a three-part classification system which identified the major partners in transfer and the key time periods to support effective transfer. This Role Time Model has proven to be a useful framework in organizing transfer strategies by each partner in each time period. It also has provided guidelines on how learning professionals can build the transfer partnership. By using this classification system, practitioners can take a closer look at who is really involved in the implementation of strong workplace initiatives and what needs to be done to seriously talk about transfer of learning.

A third contribution this study has made is in the area of barriers to learning transfer. The findings suggest that, according to instructors, these barriers can be categorized into discrete factors. Trainees discussed their key inhibitors to transfer as attitudinal and the lack of opportunity to use skills. The supervisors perceived their barriers as being shop floor pressures, attitudinal and the limited opportunities to practice. These barriers can be viewed by

both practitioners and researchers through two lenses – characteristics of trainees and characteristics of the work environment. It is in this latter area that much more opportunity exists for stakeholder support in transfer. This seems to be the door of entry to turn these mentioned barriers into enhancers. In part, the rich domain of recent empirical studies on work environment characteristics can help build new transfer knowledge around inhibitors. For example, Rouiller and Goldstein (1993) developed an extensive transfer climate survey based on social learning theory in which they identified a number of situational cues and types of feedback. This kind of study illustrates that transfer of learning is not a simple process, but at the same time, provides some ways for changing workplace climates that are not conducive to transfer. In addition, Brinkerhoff and Montesino (1995) attempted to intervene to change a work environmental factor of supervisory support. In this study, supervisors discussed with trainees, prior to training, such issues as course content, job expectations and post-training concerns. Results supported the use of such intervention strategies to improve the transfer of learning.

On a final note, it seems clear from this study that the transfer of learning is not an accidental thing. It can be engineered, measured and investigated. As a result, literacy training professionals can create support systems with the other stakeholders to work towards higher levels of transfer. Also, it seems evident that learners and their supervisors are now gaining new status as partners in the management of the transfer process.

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