

Individual Learning Models in Human Resource Development

Jennifer E. McGuire

Department of Higher Education and Learning Technology, Texas A&M University-Commerce

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Dr. Tony Lee

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Abstract

Organizational learning is a vital part of an organization's ability to grow and adapt to environmental changes. Individual learning within an organization contributes to the organization's continued growth. Human Resource Development focuses on helping the organization's individual members develop their skills and knowledge. Individual learning models rooted in andragogical learning theory are experiential, informal/incidental, and transformational learning. Human Resource Development professionals can develop learning experiences based on these models that will benefit the individual learner with an enriching learning experience, resulting in organizational learning and growth.

Individual Learning Models in Human Resource Development

Human Resource Development is defined by Swanson and Holton (2009) as “a process of developing and unleashing expertise for the purpose of improving individual, team, work process, and organizational system performance” (p.4). Kim (1993) states, “an organization learns through its individual members and, therefore, is affected either directly or indirectly by individual learning” (41). Organizations view individual improvement as crucial to their ability to change and grow (Casey, 2005, p. 131). Individual learning models can help Human Resource Development professionals develop training programs that can aid the individuals in the organization to adapt to the organizational changes and improve the organizational system performance. Individual learning that is relevant to the organization and has the opportunity for application in the work environment that will benefit both the individual and the organization (Casey, 2005, p. 131-133). Individual learning models that Human Resource Development can use to develop training are experiential, informal/incidental, and transformational (Swanson & Holton, 2009, p.194).

Literature Review

Andragogy

Before we can address the individual learning models, we need to understand adult learning theory because Human Resource Development revolves around adult learners. Merriam-Webster defines andragogy as the art or science of teaching adults (andragogy, 2021). Andragogy is learner-centered and is based on six assumptions of adult learners (Knowles et al., 2005). Many authors have translated Knowles’ assumption into their own words, but Fornicciari and Lund Dean have translated the assumptions into plain, understandable terms:

1. Adults need to know the “why” of learning.

2. Adults learn through trial-and-error experience.
3. Adults should own their own decisions about learning.
4. Adults prefer learning that which is immediately relevant to their lives.
5. Adults learn better from problem-based than content-based environments.
6. Adults learn better with intrinsic versus extrinsic motivators (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2013).

The andragogical model of learning includes the andragogical process design presented by Knowles (1995, 1990, 1984, as cited in Swanson & Holton, 2009). This model of learning is an eight-step process used to design learning experiences centered around the adult learner:

1. Prepare learners for the program.
2. Establish a climate conducive to learning.
3. Involve learners in mutual planning.
4. Involve participants in diagnosing their learning needs.
5. Involve learners in forming their learning objectives.
6. Involve learners in designing learning plans.
7. Help learners carry out their learning plans
8. Involve learners in evaluating their learning outcomes (Knowles, 1995, as cited in Swanson & Holton, 2009).

Individual learners within an organization are adults and require a model of learning geared toward their needs. The andragogical model of learning is learner-centered and focuses on creating an autonomous adult learner that is adaptable. They are in control of when, why, and how they learn. The instructor takes on a mentor role to guide the individual learner through the learning process (Forrest & Peterson, 2006, P. 114-117).

Experiential Learning Model

Individuals experience learning every day, whether they are a child learning to walk or an adult learning a new recipe. Morris (2019) states, “What is fascinating about *learning* is that it cannot occur without *experience*.” This statement is a simple way to explain experiential learning—you must have the experience to learn. Bergsteiner et al. (2010) states, “learning is a cognitive process involving constant adaptation to, and engagement with one’s environment” (p. 30). An individual’s various daily situations can translate to a learning experience that can be reflected upon (Beard & Wilson, 2013, p. 15) and contribute to their personal and professional development.

Kolb (2014) defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 49). Kolb’s experiential learning theory is based on the belief that learning is a “lifelong process” that encompasses an individual’s experiences from education, work, and life (Kolb, 2014, p. 3). Every experience in a learner’s life is an opportunity to learn and grow. The experiential learning process is a *spiral cycle* that has the learner being fully immersed in new learning experiences (concrete experiences); observing and reflecting learning experiences from various *perspectives* (reflective observation); creating *concepts* from their *observations* that are *logically sound theories* (abstract conceptualization); and put these theories into practice for decision making and problem solving (active experimentation). It is impractical to use all these abilities at the same time, therefore the learner must analyze the learning experience to determine the best abilities to use (Kolb, 2014, ch. 42).

Experiential learning takes place in a variety of modes including direct, simulated, and collaborative situations (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 159). Human Resource Development professionals can use experiential learning to design experience-based programs that allow the

individual learners to have that concrete experience they can then reflect upon and integrate into their future performance. Formal training may not always convey the same concepts and skills that result from hands-on experience.

Roleplaying is an experiential learning model that can be used in various industries and modalities. COVID-19 forced the world to go into lockdown, effectively shutting down many businesses and schools, including Malaysia's predoctoral dental education program. Students were scheduled to start their workplace-based learning unit when the world went into lockdown. The program had to adapt the learning design to a virtual roleplay experience. The program proved that an experiential learning model could be successful when shifted to a virtual environment (Arunachalam et al., 2020, p. 1055).

One of my previous jobs centered on sales and customer service via the telephone. I was presented with a manual that provided step-by-step processes and scripts for sales and problem-solving. The formal learning from reading the manual did not make sense until I had to use the information in the manual during a call with a customer. My supervisor would roleplay sales and customer service calls to make the training experiential. I would refer to the manual to aid me through the roleplay. However, the experience of interacting with another person and implementing the strategies in the manual helped me learn the skills to perform the job. Every call was unique and provided an experience to reflect and process to improve my job performance on future calls.

Experiential learning is an adaptive learning model. Learners can learn from their everyday activities through on-the-job training or through carefully crafted experiential programs. Organizations can quickly adapt this learning model to fit any department, position, or learning style.

Informal/Incidental Learning Model

Informal, or incidental, learning is an individual learning model in the workplace that happens every day. Marsick et al. (1999) state that informal workplace learning is “learning that is integrated with daily work and routines and that often happens unconsciously” (as cited in Froehlich et al., 2014, p. 30). Informal learning does not have the structure that is part of formal learning; it is a part of the learner’s daily routine and can include incidental learning—learning that happens unconsciously and “is not recognized by the learner themselves” (Froehlich et al., 2014, p.31). Swanson and Holton (2009) define incidental learning “as a byproduct of some other activity, such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction, sensing the organizational culture, trial-and-error experimentation, or even formal learning” (p. 213). Swanson and Holton (2009) list examples of informal workplace learning to include “self-directed learning, mentoring, coaching, networking, learning from mistakes, and trial and error” (p. 213-14).

A 1992 study conducted by the Education Development Center, Inc. of Massachusetts “explored the variables that affect informal learning in the workplace” (Leslie et al., 1998). This study revealed that workers learned intrapersonal, interpersonal, and culture informally as they learned new job duties. Leslie et al. (1998) list these skills as:

- Intrapersonal: Problem-solving, creativity, coping with stress, dealing with novel situations.
- Interpersonal: Interacting, cooperating, and sharing skills and information with other employees.
- Culture: What behavior is acceptable, what notions are culturally rewarded and lead to career advancement, how mistakes are treated, and the like (p. 14).

There is a fine line between informal and formal learning in organizations. Some of the examples of informal workplace learning previously mentioned— mentoring and coaching— are many times initiated by the organization, so when do they become formal instead of informal? I have been a part of a mentoring program in my organization. The entire process had a formal structure including expectations and duties of the mentor and mentee. This mentor program falls into the realm of formal learning. I have fallen into an informal mentor relationship with a previous supervisor at this same institution. They helped develop my leadership skills and continue to be a source of knowledge when I struggle with a project. My meetings with this mentor are never structured. They do not follow a prescriptive plan of outcomes or a set schedule. These two instances of mentoring show the contrast between formal versus informal learning.

Transformational Learning Model

Learning that changes the learner's view of themselves and the world either gradually or as a result of a "sudden, powerful experience" is transformational learning (Clark, 1993, as cited by Baumgartner, 2001, p. 16). This type of learning results in the learner reflecting and reevaluating their perspective of a situation and their values. Taylor (2007) states that critical reflection is essential to transformative learning (p. 185). The next step of transformational learning is to talk about the experience and change in perspective with others, hoping to receive the support of their new perspective. The transformational learning experience is complete when the learner embodies the new perspective in their everyday activities (Baumgartner, 2001, p. 17).

Double-loop learning is transformational learning that occurs when the learner has no previous learning experience to reference; therefore, they must "change their mental schema in a fundamental way" (Swanson & Holton, 2009, p. 215). Schon (1987) gives us the terms "knowing

in action” and “reflection in action” (as cited by Swanson & Holton, 2009, p. 215). Knowing in action is the “automatic responses based on our existing mental schema that enable us to perform efficiently in daily actions” (Swanson & Holton, 2009, p. 215). Knowing action can be compared to driving home from work, arriving home but not remembering the act of driving. Your brain and muscles know the route and perform the actions on autopilot. This can happen in your workplace when you perform repetitive actions. Reflection in action occurs when you must reflect on an experience as it happens because you have no experience to draw on to perform the action (Swanson & Holton, 2009, p. 215).

Individual transformative learning can lead to transformative organizational learning. Part of the transformative learning process is sharing their new perspective with others in the organization. This one learner’s transformative learning experience can then be a catalyst for others in the organization to experience the same transformational learning experience. Choy (2009) observes that “changes in perspectives then easily lead to more creative and innovative practices at work” (p. 66). Transformational learning design should focus on reflection rather than completing tasks and “healthy relationships” between organizational members. These elements will foster transformational learning within the workplace (Choy, 2009, p. 67).

Conclusions

Human Resource Development is an essential function of organizations today. Effective organizational learning can be a “source of competitive advantage” (Sisaye & Birnberg, 2010, p.337) and is “essential to sustainable and innovative culture development” (Lau et al., 2019, p. 107). Organizations have historically relied on traditional development options that focus on skill development, which satisfies the need to learn, rather than transformative learning, altering their

“needs and values” (Lau et al., 2019, p. 109). Human Resource Development that focuses on individual learning models can affect organizational change.

Andragogy is an adult learning theory that assumes adult learners are self-directed, bring experience to the learning process, are ready to learn, address issues in their lives, understand why they are learning, and are driven by an internal need to learn. The adult learner is involved throughout the process, including planning, diagnosing their needs, forming their learning objectives, designing their learning plans, and evaluating their outcomes, resulting in individuals being invested in their learning throughout the process. Individual learning models that have a basis in andragogical learning theory are experiential, informal/incidental, and transformative.

Experiential learning models incorporate daily experience into an individual’s learning process. This can include direct learning, such as on-the-job training; simulation learning, such as roleplaying; and collaborative learning, such as teamwork. The learning process includes concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Informal and incidental learning happens every day, just like experiential learning; however, informal and incidental learning are not planned. Both happen unconsciously and are a byproduct of everyday tasks. These individual learning modes are not planned or structured. Some examples include mentoring or coaching.

Transformational learning centers around the transformation of the learner. In this model, an impactful experience causes the learner to critically reflect on the experience, which changes their view of themselves and the world. The next step in this process includes discussion with others to validate their change. The process is complete when the learner embraces the transformation as part of their daily lives. Transformational learning includes reflection in action,

an experience that requires you to reflect as the experience happens because you have no previous knowledge of the action.

Organizational learning is a vital part of an organization's ability to grow and adapt to environmental changes. Individual learning within an organization contributes to this continued growth. Human Resource Development professionals can develop experiential learning, informal/incidental learning, and transformational learning models to benefit the individual learner with an enriching learning experience, resulting in organizational learning and growth.

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