CULTURALLY PROFICIENT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: LESSONS LEARNED FROM AFRICA

Corinne Brion, Ph.D.[1]

ABSTRACT: Culture is a predominant force in people's lives that impacts learning and thus culture influences learning transfer. Because working across nations has become the norm and every year billions of dollars are spent on professional learning around the world, it is crucial for organizations to understand the role culture plays on the learning transfer process. Using a multidimensional model of learning transfer as a conceptual framework, this qualitative study used a case study approach to examine the impact of culture on learning transfer in Burkina Faso and Ghana, West Africa. Interviews were conducted with 20 principals who attended leadership professional learning in Ghana and Burkina Faso. Data collection also included observations. Findings indicated that several cultural factors influenced learning transfer in these two nations in the area of pretraining. Specifically, cultural differences pertained to the notion of time, the preference to avoid uncertainties, the importance of formalities and power dynamics. Based on these findings, the author offers recommendations.

Keywords: culture, training, learning transfer, professional learning, pretraining

For this paper, the author defines professional learning as all learning opportunities available to adults working in any settings, in any positions and levels. Such learning may occur online or face-to-face both formally and informally in workshops, classes, courses, and seminars. In 2020, American organizations alone spent $82.5 billion on professional learning (PL) to develop their employees' skills and knowledge base (Statista, 2020). Yet despite the money invested, seminal scholars such as Ford et al. (2011) and Saks and Belcourt (2006) maintained that these investments yield low to moderate results because employees do not often transfer the newly acquired knowledge to their workplaces. Saks and Belcourt (2006) affirmed that in Canada the rate of transferring learning to the workplace is low, with estimates of 38% of trainees failing to transfer immediately after PL events and almost 70% faltering after a year.

Culture is a predominant force in people's lives that impacts learning and the implementation of that learning (Rahyuda et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2009). Because working across nations has become the norm and cultures are not homogeneous among nations, it is crucial for organizations to understand the role culture plays on the learning transfer process in order for organizations to get a return on their financial, time, and human investments (Raver & Dyne, 2017).

Being able to transfer newly acquired knowledge and skills is the ultimate goal of PL, yet it is the most challenging to achieve (Baldwin et al., 2017; Grossman & Salas, 2011). Despite the large amount of research on learning transfer, there are a limited number of empirical field studies (Choi & Roulston, 2015; Rahyuda et al., 2014). There are also few learning transfer models that account for cultural differences on the transfer of learning process (Rahyuda et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2009). To date, learning transfer models have outlined the importance of organizational culture (Ford, 2020; Gil et al., 2018) and

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[1] School of Education and Health Sciences, Department of Educational Administration, University of Dayton. cbrion1@udayton.edu

specifically the role transfer climate plays in enhancing or hindering learning transfer (Blume et al., 2019; Grossman & Salas, 2011; Hughes et al., 2018) but none have taken into consideration the central influence of culture on the entire transfer process. The purpose of this qualitative study was to fill this knowledge gap by examining how, if at all, cultural factors influenced learning transfer. To illustrate the importance that culture has on PL and because there is a lack of studies that offer a practical perspective from developing countries (Rahyuda et al., 2014), this study took place among principals in two West African countries: Burkina Faso and Ghana. If practitioners and PL organizers understood how culture affects learning transfer, organizations around the world would get a better return on their investments because implementation of new knowledge would take place. In addition, employees would feel more empowered which would have a positive impact on the organization's climate and culture.

This research adds to the adult learning and learning transfer literature while also providing some country-specific and practical recommendations that will benefit training organizers and facilitators in Burkina Faso and Ghana. These recommendations will also provide a blueprint that other facilitators, leaders and human resource officers in global organizations and multinational corporations can use to reflect on their learning transfer practices within the culture in which they operate.

Summary of the Literature

Learning transfer, also referred to as training transfer, is defined as "the effective and continuing application by learners—to their performance of jobs or other individual, organizational, or community responsibilities—of knowledge and skills gained in the learning activities" (Broad, 1997, p. 2). Learning transfer has been studied for over 30 years theoretically and quantitatively in the organizational psychology, business and human resource development fields. In their seminal meta-analysis paper, Baldwin and Ford (1988) were first to categorize the enhancers and inhibitors to learning transfer. The authors organized them into three input factors: (1) the factors related to learners' characteristics; (2) the factors pertaining to the intervention design and delivery; and (3) the factors affected by the work environment. The influence of cultural factors on learning transfer was absent from any of the training inputs. Broad and Newstrom (1992) identified six key factors that either hinder or promote learning transfer: (a) program participants, their motivation and dispositions and previous knowledge; (b) program design and execution including the strategies for learning transfer; (c) program content which is adapted to the needs of the learners; (d) changes required to apply learning, within the organization, complexity of change; (e) organizational context such as people, structure, and cultural milieu within the organization, that can support or prevent transfer of learning. "Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, 2011, p. 3). Because learning is a social endeavor and knowledge is contextual, people's cultures impact the way they learn, interact, communicate, and resolve conflicts (Lindsey et al., 2018). Culture also impacts learning transfer because if people do not learn due to a language barrier or the non-respect of traditions and preferred learning styles (collectivistic versus individualistic, for example), they will not be able to implement the new knowledge to

their jobs. Currently, there are a limited number of research studies that examine the influence of culture on the learning transfer phenomenon in its entirety (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Closson, 2013; Sarkar-Barney, 2004; Silver, 2000; Yang et al., 2009). In this paper, the author reported the findings pertaining to the influence of cultural factors on the learning transfer process in the areas of pretraining only.

Conceptual Framework

On the basis of the literature on the role of culture role on the learning transfer process, some authors argue that there is a need for a comprehensive, multidimensional, and unifying model of learning transfer that considers culture as a key factor (Raver & Van Dyne, 2017). Therefore, the author merged and extended existing models of learning transfer to construct the MMLT (Brion, 2021).

Multidimensional Model of Learning Transfer (MMLT)

The MMLT is a culturally grounded and evidence-based model that developed from data collected, analyzed, and synthetized over six years in educational institutions in five African nations (Brion, 2021). Even though the data were collected in Africa, the findings could be informative to other nations. In MMLT, the author asserts that culture is the predominant enhancer and inhibitor to transfer and that culture affects the entire learning transfer process (Brion, 2021). MMLT is composed of six dimensions: Pretraining, Learner, Facilitator, Material and Content, Context and Environment, and Post-Training (See Appendices).

Pretraining

Pretraining includes the orientation of facilitators and other key stakeholders so that they can support the PL once it has begun. Pretraining also includes communicating expectations to facilitators and learners explaining who will benefit from the PL event, stating that participants are accountable to implement new knowledge and sharing the schedule, goals, and information that is perceived as mandatory (Yang et al., 2009).

Learner

Learners are the participants in the PL program. This dimension refers to understanding the learners' motivation and their background. The learner category also includes understanding differences in learning styles (Lindsey et al., 2018) as well as language and writing differences.

Facilitator

Effective facilitators must understand the adult participants' background as well as their own and how their beliefs may affect learning and the learning transfer (Caffarella and Daffron, 2013). Facilitator also refers to the understanding of language and writing differences, setting goals, and the selection of participants (Yang et al., 2009).

Content and Materials

Content and Materials involves using evidence based, culturally relevant, and contextualized materials (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013). It also involves using a pedagogical approach based on andragogy, or how adults learn best (Knowles, 1980; Mezirow, 2000).

Context and Environment

This dimension comprises the training and work environment and the sociocultural context. It also refers to having enough time to transfer knowledge, the support for action, the resources, the freedom to act, and peer support (Burke & Hutchins, 2008).

Follow-up

Follow-up is often overlooked and is necessary to avoid skill decay and training relapse (Brion, 2021). Follow-up includes tutor-facilitated networks via mobile technology (Brion, 2018), coaching, testimonials, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), coaching, and E-coaching (Speck & Knipe, 2005). Understanding how culture practically impacts the pretraining dimension in Burkina Faso and Ghana would help PL attendees implement new knowledge, improve organizations' outcomes while also increasing their company's return on investments in these two nations.

Methods

This qualitative study is part of a larger project that used a case study design to better understand the impact of culture on learning transfer. The author opted for a case study approach because it provides the ability to examine in detail a phenomenon as it manifests in everyday contexts (Yin, 2014). In this paper, the author reports the findings related to the following research question: How did the pretraining dimension of the MMLT influence learning transfer?

Selection of Sites

The sites selected for this research study were seven leadership PL events in Burkina Faso and 18 in Ghana over the course of six years. Each PL program lasted two to three days. Participants were school principals of low-fee private schools. These sites were selected because the author had access to them and had forged trusted relationships with the principals.

Selection of Participants

This research relied on a purposive criterion sampling of 20 men and women principals, 10 in each country, working in low-fee private schools in urban and rural areas. Their age ranged from 36 to 62 years old. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select participants from whom the author could learn the most to answer the research question

of the study (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Criterion sampling was also used to select participants.

Data Collection

Data collection included interviews with 20 school leaders in 2019 and observations and field notes pertaining to how culture influenced learning transfer from 70 days of training observation. In 2019, the author conducted 10 one-on-one interviews with principals from Burkina Faso and 10 principals from Ghana during the fifth year of her work in West Africa which allowed her to more deeply understand cultural differences and commonalities among the nations. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended and lasted 45 minutes. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim in French and English. The French transcriptions were not translated into English but rather coded in French, the author's native language. These interviews occurred approximately three months after principals received the three-day school leadership PL to allow for reflection and transfer time. The author observed the 20 principals during the PL events. She observed a total of 70 days of training over six years: 25 in Burkina Faso and 45 in Ghana. Per Wolcott's advice (1994), the observations were structured.

Data Analysis

Coding is the base of the analysis (Saldaña, 2009). Due to the large amount of data to code, the data were pre-coded by highlighting significant participants' quotes or passages that related to the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The pre-coding allowed the investigator to place relevant quotes under the MMLT's pretraining category. Following the pre-coding, the analysis of qualitative data took place over two cycles of coding. In round one, the author used in vivo coding to develop codes for each key point emerging from the interviews, documents, field notes, and journal. Examples of codes that emerged from the data during this coding phase included titles, gender issues, age differences affect interactions. In round two, using axial coding, the researcher grouped the preliminary codes into overlapping categories to create themes. Examples of codes were power dynamics, formalities, group.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the present study's internal validity, the researcher included four strategies into the design of the present study. First, the author triangulated the data using several different sources of data such as the interviews and numerous observations. The different sources of data contributed to achieving saturation and the quality of the data collected (Creswell, 2013). Second, this researcher went back to the participants to ask them to check the accuracy of the findings (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Third, the author created a data trail (Rodgers, 2008). This strategy helped ensure that sufficient transcript data supported the results reported in this study. Following this process also ensured that the author was not sharing her viewpoint but, rather, the perspectives of the participants.

Findings

To preserve the integrity of the findings, the author used the participants' comments verbatim. She also used pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants. In this paper, the author shared the findings pertaining to the MMLT's pretraining category because this dimension is often overlooked in the learning transfer process.

Pretraining

During the six years that the author worked in Burkina Faso and Ghana, she saw in all principals the following cultural factors affecting the pretraining phase over and appeared to hinder learning transfer: the notion of time, the importance of avoiding uncertainty, respecting formalities and understanding how power is viewed and enacted.

The Notion of Time

In both nations, the notion of time was lived differently. In Burkina Faso, participants arrived one hour early to the PL and the event started on time whereas in Ghana, it was common for the PL to start two to three hours after the scheduled time as the team of facilitators would wait for most of the attendees to arrive. In her journal, the researcher wrote the following comment regarding the notion of time: "Coming from the West, I often wondered if the tardiness was due to the heavy traffic or the fact that participants were school leaders who may have gone to their schools prior to the start of the PL." Curious about the reasons for such dissimilarities between Burkina Faso and Ghana, I sought some explanations from the participants and her Ghanaian local colleagues who explained that "it was cultural." My local colleagues advised the facilitating team to start the PL on time. Agnes pursued: "As participants see the value in the PL, they will come on time. They come late first because they do not know what they can gain from training events, it happens all the time." A Ghanaian principal named Godwin used a joke to make fun of himself, he said: "You Americans have nice watches, but we have the time." Although this joke may be seen as a stereotyped notion of culture, it denoted the unperturbed attitude that the Ghanaians had towards time and was important to facilitators to plan their PL accordingly so that learning transfer was not inhibited.

Understanding the notion of time has important repercussions for the pretraining phase. During this phase PL organizers should orient facilitators on cultural differences, communicate expectations and norms to facilitators and learners, explain who will benefit from training, state that participants are accountable to implement new knowledge, and share the schedule. If participants come late, they miss some training content and thus they will not be able to transfer knowledge they may have missed due to the different understandings of the notion of time. It was also important to know that Burkinabe come early to PL events as facilitators could use this time to bond with their audience, re-explain concepts, and ask participants about their schools.

Preference to Avoid Uncertainty

Understanding that Burkinabe and Ghanaian participants needed to know in advance details about the training was important during the pretraining phase. Participants did not feel comfortable not knowing about the PL event ahead of time. Participants requested clear descriptions of the training and why they should attend, how the training would benefit their schools, who the facilitators were, the PL goals, and a detailed schedule for each day that outlined breaks and lunch times. When the author asked local colleagues in both nations about the need to create an hour per hour schedule, they replied:

>It is part of our culture, you just have to do it, or they will not come. I think it is because it takes a lot of effort to come to a training, transportation in the dust, time, gas, so they want to know if it will be worthwhile.

Martha from Burkina Faso added:

>I like to know what is going to happen in advance, so I can get prepared, get there on time, and get coverage at school and at home. I also like to know where the training is and if there are breaks and food, so I know if it is going to cost me money.

Adwoa in Ghana shared the sentiment of the group when she said: "I think it is nicer when we know all the details and expectations in advance so we can decide to come or not." Reuben noted:

>We also do not often go to hotels for a training, so when we know the location in advance, the detailed content and if we are expected to do something post training, who will be there because we do not want to waste our time with training that are not well put together and do not force us to improve.

As participants mentioned, providing detailed information ahead of time was not only a cultural expectation, but it also increased motivation, attendance, and punctuality. Avoiding uncertainty by preparing a detailed description of the PL allowed participants to decide to attend the PL or not.

Formalities Matter

In both countries, people value and honor traditions. Burkina Faso, however, is more formal than Ghana when it comes to PL. For example, is not unusual for Burkinabe to have an opening and closing ceremony with media, speeches, and special addresses at PL sessions. Being French, the researcher could hear the formality of the French language during these ceremonies. In an excerpt of her journal, the author wrote:

>I could see the conventionalism and importance of these events in the formal traditional attires people wore. During the pre- and post-PL ceremonies, organizers or authority figures gave formal speeches outlining their roles and titles, the importance of the training, and welcoming participants and facilitators.

This custom was essential to understand when planning for PL to plan for more time for speeches and for closing remarks. It was also important for facilitators to prepare a speech. Finally, understanding this tradition helped build trust and rapport with participants, local dignitaries, and officials. Additionally, this cultural practice was significant for PL because time and resources had to be allocated for the ceremonies.

The Importance of Titles, Gender, and Age

Titles, gender, and age played a significant role in the power dynamics between participants and facilitators. This dynamic was particularly apparent in the Burkinabe PL context. Titles were extremely important. If participants were reverends or had any kinds of affiliations with the Church, they were automatically respected and trusted by the rest of the group. People tended to let reverends speak first. Moreover, academic titles and formal educational levels appeared to matter to trainees. Local facilitators holding a PhD were in the eyes of Eli "important people." Emile exemplified this idea when he said:

> You know here, it makes you look like someone if you have a title and you get respect and recognition, so we are more likely to attend a training and use the knowledge learned if people are known and/or have titles.

Ama seconded this perspective when she said: "If there is a famous or semi-known pastor in the room, I will come because if that person sees value in the training, I better see it too." In their own words, Emile and Ama shared that who is in the PL room matters at first and has an influence on transfer. Consequently, during the pretraining, organizers could share the participants names and affiliations of participants if and when culturally and legally appropriate.

Discussion and Implications

When working in Burkina Faso and Ghana, pretraining is particularly important because local and foreign facilitators may not be familiar with the relation between cultural factors and learning transfer. For example, findings from this research outlined that the Burkinabe culture valued opening and closing ceremonies with dignitaries. Without knowing this and respecting this cultural norm, facilitators may unknowingly disrespect participants and their culture. As a result of this cultural faux-pas, participants may not attend the PL or may not be willing to transfer knowledge. In the same way, participants stated the importance of having logistical details ahead of time. Within the pretraining phase, this study provided specific examples of cultural values that can influence learning transfer and hence provided a road map for organizations and practitioners working in these countries or with countries with similar cultural values.

Based on these findings pertaining to cultural factors within the pretraining phase there is a need for a comprehensive, multidimensional, and unifying model of learning transfer that considers culture as a key factor (Raver & Van Dyne, 2017). The MMLT (Brion, 2021) was designed to promote cultural awareness by respecting participants' cultures when planning, organizing, conducting, following up, and evaluating PL events. This model is salient for all institutions and should be of particular interest to organizations who work with a diverse staff population and/or work across countries.

Limitations

First, the sample was limited to low-fee private schools and second, the schools were located in two countries in West Africa, limiting the generalization of the findings to

other contexts. However, these findings may be informative for PL organizers who work in and with people whose countries have similar cultures.

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