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Extending the boundaries of learning in management education: An integrative approach for promoting transfer of training into the practice environment

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Abstract: The business environment has been critical of academic business schools for not preparing its graduates adequately for the world of practice. Business schools have responded by sharpening their focus on the achievement of professional skills in their graduates through outcomes based initiatives. Development of these skills, however, fare better when tested and implemented in a situated or work based context. This study examines the application of an integrated learning strategy using an experiential learning framework that is driven by assessment on transfer of training outcomes. Participants in a post-graduate certificate in management program set work place learning goals, maintained reflective journals and engaged in peer coaching for eight weeks following the academic component of their study. At the completion of this interval, participants submitted reports outlining their learning outcomes and experiences. Results indicate positive transfer of learned academic material into the workplace indicating positive outcomes for participants in the program. Transfer of professional skills into the workplace was strengthened by this integrated learning strategy.

Keywords: professional skills, management education, coaching

Introduction

The business environment has been critical of academic business schools for not preparing its graduates adequately for the world of practice (Karpin, 1995). This criticism, in turn, has led business schools to sharpen their focus on the achievement of professional skills in their graduates. Professional skills or graduate attributes, are things such as team working skills, interaction skills, life long learning skills, critical and creative thinking skill, and oral and written communication (CBS, 2005). The application of professional skills, however, is best carried out in a situated context or the workplace itself (Schon, 1991). Brown, Collins and Duguid. (1989) describe learning which encompasses both the physical and social contexts, as situated learning.

Academic programs are quite limited in their ability to provide this situated context because of its typical geographic separation from the business community. While applied case studies and assignments attempt to extend the learning further, they are also similarly limited in their ability to transfer learning into the professional practice environment. Learning strategies that can increase the integration learning in situated contexts should elevate the transfer of academic material into the workplace and produce graduates that are more able to work within the world of business more competently. Higgs and Titchen (1995) support this claim by stating that the experiences gained in a situated context enable the learners' theoretical and professional skills to be developed further.

The research on transfer of training indicates relatively poor transfer of training from the training environment into the workplace, and may be one of the reasons by the business community has been so critical of business schools. Cromwell and Kolb (2004) report that

only ten to fifteen percent of training actually results in long term transfer to the workplace. Transfer of training is defined as the degree to which trainees effectively apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes gained in a training context to the job (Newstrom, 1986). For training to be considered successful the learning must be generalised to the job context and maintained over a period of time (Broad and Newstrom, 1992). Baldwin and Ford (1988) describe three factors which influence transfer of training: trainee characteristics; training design; and work-environment factors. Trainee characteristics are the abilities, skills, motivation and personality factors of the trainee. Training design factors include the didactic versus experiential focus of the program. Work environment factors include supervisory and peer support as well as constraints and opportunities to perform learned behaviour on job.

While academic programs can influence trainee characteristics somewhat by being selective about who they admit to their courses, the area where there is the most potential for influencing transfer is in training design. By shifting away from a didactic approach to one that employs an integrated learning and assessment strategy it becomes possible to extend learning into the workplace and deliver real outcomes. The three integrated learning strategies described in this paper are modelled on the work of Riley-Doucet and Wilson (1997) and include goal setting (Locke, 1996), reflective journaling (Kerka, 1996), and peer coaching (Ladyshevsky, 2001; Ladyshevsky and Varey, 2005; Ladyshevsky and Ryan, 2006). Collectively these three strategies are embedded into an experiential learning framework (Kolb, 1984) that is driven by a practical, work-based assessment strategy.

Goal setting is key to driving learning outcomes in a desired direction and there has been extensive research illustrating this principle (Locke, 1996). Locke states that when challenging and specific goals are put into operation, the motivation to achieve increases. The challenging nature of the goal inspires people to work towards them. The specificity of the goal moderates performance because it focuses energy towards achieving the outcome in a prescribed manner.

The incorporation of peer coaching (PC) may further escalate goal achievement. This occurs through the feedback process in which the learner gains information from their coach about their progress towards the goal (Locke, 1996). While the efficacy of coaching is gaining credibility in the business world as a means to enhance skill development (Olivero, 1997; Toegel and Conger, 2003), it has yet to be applied extensively in the classroom and assessment practices of academic programs.

Reflective learning journals, another component of the strategy, encourage learners to engage with the content by examining their experiences in applying the learned material (Kerka, 1996). Questions, insights, dilemmas and progress towards goals are all noted in the journal. This information can be reviewed later to increase depth of understanding, to map progress, and to share with their PC to gain further insights.

Engaging the students in this learning strategy is driven by having the learning embedded within the context of an experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), which is driven initially by assessment. The journaling encourages participants to reflect on their experiences in learning (Kerka, 1996). Further, peer coaches can ask learners to divulge some of their thoughts, questions and actions that they have recorded in their journal for discussion. This increases the depth of the reflection stage and supports the conclusions that emerge from the coaching. The experiential learning cycle is predominately a single loop learning experience but when integrated with peer coaching, double loop learning experiences are more possible (Argyris,

1991). Double loop learning takes place when coaching facilitates the reshaping and restructuring of the coachee's underlying beliefs such that they become capable of doing different things.

In several reviews of the literature, it has been reported that when these integrative learning systems are employed, statistically significant gains in performance are achieved (Ackland, 1991; Joyce and Showers, 1995; Skinner and Welch, 1996). The increases in performance and achievement that stem from peer coaching can be understood by exploring the concept of cognitive development theory (Piaget, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978; 1986). These theorists argue that peer interaction promotes cognitive development because when a learner is engaged in a task or problem, and discusses their ideas with another peer, it enables the learner to further construct their understanding of the problem under question. This reconstruction is characteristic of the constructivist approach reported in the literature (Biehler and Snowman, 1997).

For peer coaching to work, the partnership must be based on trust and respect, and participants must receive adequate support on how to build successful coaching relationships (Zeus and Skiffington, 2000; Ladyshewsky, 2001). Since peers are at an equal level, the coaching discourse is far less threatening (Damon, 1984; Damon and Phelps, 1989). Learners can be more open and inquisitive with one another and explore more fully areas of learning. This integrative learning approach challenges many teaching and learning conventions which are often about delivering information and measuring retention. Learning tends to be grounded in rational and objective knowledge practices which cause people to interrogate the learning and data rather than considering the intuitive ways in which we experience our work practices (Segal, 2001). Management education needs to move beyond the traditional education program where content is provided in lecture format as the major strategy for advancing professional development. More learner engagement and critical reflection is needed to assist students in transferring their learning to their work and practice environments (Bubna-Litic and Benn, 2003). The building of confidence and transfer of learning to the workplace cannot find expression in short term learning relationships such as lectures, seminars or workshops. Instead, Popper and Lipshitz (1992) argue that ongoing learning relationships, which are inherent in coaching, are much more effective in promoting transfer. Support for this integrative approach to learning can be found in the literature. Cromwell and Kolb (2004) found that peer support reinforced the trainee's use of the learning on the job. In another study, Holton, Bates, Seyler and Carvalho (1997) report that peer support was one of five factors with the highest correlation with learning transfer ($r = .83$). Toegel and Conger (2003) in another review of the literature found that those who demonstrated the most enhancement in their professional growth were those who had positive attitudes about the process and engaged a mentor or coach to support them in the development process. Similarly, Olivero (1997) reports on a public sector training program which was followed by coaching. They found that eight weeks of coaching increased productivity by 88 per cent whereas training alone only produced benefits of 22 per cent.

This paper reports on the use of this integrative learning approach in a post-graduate management program.

Study design

The sample for this study was composed of 15 post-graduate business students, enrolled in a four unit Graduate Certificate of Business program. This program was part of an executive

development program being delivered to a government department in Western Australia. Program content for the four units encompassed business strategy, human resource management, conflict and negotiation, communication and interpersonal skills, risk management, managing change, leadership, planning and resource management. All four units had lectures, experiential activities and work based projects and assignments. The integrated learning approach was applied in three of the four units. In each of these three units, learners had to develop specific learning goals based on the unit content, work towards achieving them in the workplace, maintain a reflective journal, and discuss progress with the support of a peer coach.

Participants selected their PC from within the class (and reciprocally coached each other) or from their workplace (and were for the most part in the coachee role). All participants were provided with a one hour information session on peer coaching. They were also provided with a written set of formal guidelines to assist them in the coaching experience. Information and resources on reflective journaling were provided to the participants.

Peer coaching meetings were to occur at a minimum fortnightly and could be face to face, by telephone or if necessary, via email. Each peer coaching assignment was eight weeks in duration, following the completion of the academic component of the unit. At the end of each eight week peer coaching experience, participants were required to submit a report outlining key learning outcomes and factors that supported or hindered the learning process. Excerpts of their learning journal and their learning goals were also included in this report. This report was worth 20 per cent of their unit grade.

At the completion of the Graduate Certificate program for this particular group of participants, they were invited to participate in a study of the program and the peer coaching process. They were informed that their reports would be used in the study if they consented to participate. Assurances of confidentiality were provided, along with information about the scope of the study. The study had also received University ethics approval.

A total of 12 (80 per cent) participants in the program consented to provide their reports for inclusion in this study. A total of 30 reports were received from the 12 participants. The reports were analysed qualitatively using nVivo, a software program that supports the coding and analysis of documents. The reports were reviewed and coded according to their meaning by the researcher. Through this process of content analysis and constant comparison (Miles and Huberman (1994), certain themes emerged which were then described more fully and organised into broader categories.

A conceptual framework outlining the categories and themes that emerged from the content analysis is illustrated in figure 5. Because of space considerations, all themes are not explored in this paper. Themes which illustrate transfer of training, the influence of coaching on transfer, and enablers which supported transfer are presented.

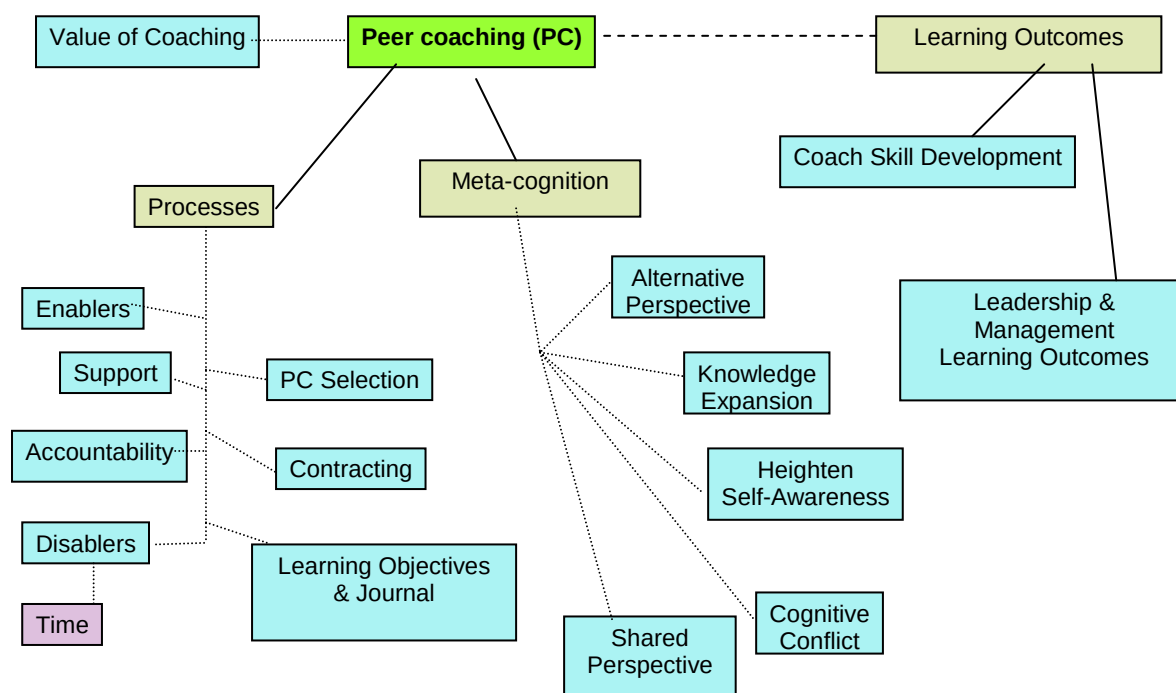


Figure 5: Conceptual framework for learning outcomes and PCing

Transfer of training: Leadership and management skills

Numerous learning outcomes were reported from participants, which provide evidence that academic content was transferred into the workplace with positive outcomes. For example, there were numerous comments regarding outcomes in the categories of communication skill, conflict management and negotiation, coaching, project management, time management and leading and facilitating teams.

I believe that I have made significant progress in improving performance of my team through changing my communication and management style. Project milestones have so far been met and team members are willing to be accountable for tasks and are interested in developing their skills. I am more confident interacting with them and they tend to approach me more for advice and assistance.

I felt more confident in my interaction with staff. I felt that I trusted them and vice versa. It appears that they showed me respect because I had shown respect and empathy to them and rewarded them. I will have to continue this approach for the future as staff appear to be more willing to take on new challenges and have produced better quality and quantity of work overall on the project.

Transfer of training: Coaching skills

The development of coaching skills was another learning outcome that was quite specific and therefore categorized separately. The opportunity to participate in a peer coaching experience enabled participants to develop their coaching skills. These coaching skills not only helped them support their coachee, but these skills were transferable to the workplace and their own staff.

I found that through my role of PC to John (fictitious name) I was able to use the skills that I developed to assist me in other parts of my role as a Manager. For example, I was able to improve the quality of feedback that I give my subordinates on their project work through asking open ended questions, actively listening, paraphrasing and initiating action on their concerns.

I feel it is rewarding to see someone learn, grow and achieve goals. Furthermore, I feel my interpersonal and communication skills are further refined through this coaching process. I feel more confident as an individual to assist people with needs.

Transfer of training: Peer coaching and meta-cognition

The peer coaching experience was viewed very positively as an organizational learning strategy. It provided participants with a critical friend within the organization and an opportunity to engage in meta-cognitive reflection. This meta-cognitive reflection supported transfer of the academic content into the practice environment. Higgs and Titchen (1995) define metacognition as being aware of one's own cognitive processes and controlling them. Further, they feel that good meta-cognitive skill leads to deeper learning, as reflection-in-action and reflection-about-action (Schon, 1991) is what leads to competency. Meta-cognitive outcomes were categorised into five sub-categories reflecting the nature of the comments. These five categories were: alternative perspectives; knowledge expansion; heightened self-awareness; cognitive conflict; and shared perspectives. Alternative perspectives were situations in which participants were able to share different perspectives on an issue or learning challenge.

The peer coaching experience provided a focus for achieving my learning objective. It gave me a medium for investigating different scenarios and different ways of approaching the management of staff performance.

Knowledge expansion involved gaining new knowledge as a result of the peer coaching dialogue.

Through deeper and more critical thinking, I am able to expand and refine my knowledge in program development areas. Peer coaching enables me to set aside time and talk about specific learning objective areas. I was able to source fresh ideas from peer coaching.

Heightened self-awareness involved gaining insights into one's own thinking or practice.

The whole experience was beneficial as it made me re-evaluate my previous management behaviours and actions and allowed me to engage in self reflection and analysis, so that I could review alternative courses of actions and achieve my learning objective..

Cognitive conflict was a positive exchange of different viewpoints, which eventually led to a deeper and more informed understanding of a concept, issue or learning challenge.

We came across a number of situations where my approaches were different to my coach. We took the opportunities to explore and brainstorm the issues more in depth. It encouraged both of us to think critically to resolve the conflicts and problems we experienced.

Lastly, shared perspectives involved contributing ideas to a discussion or debate on a specific learning issue or challenge.

As trust has been developed between my PC and myself, at the previous coaching sessions it is easier to discuss sensitive issues like conflict experiences and what we think about common conflicts at the workplace and be able to share the experiences we had.

Journals and learning goals

The use of learning goals and reflective journals was also a key process that influenced the peer coaching and transfer process. These learning strategies enabled participants to more strategically reflect on their progress and to map out their learning progress. Individuals could review events since the last coaching meeting and bring their coach up to date on progress as well as raise new questions for discussion.

In most cases we did incorporate the learning journal contents into the peer coaching sessions. Using this process seemed to improve the quality of the discussion between my PC and myself. It prompted me to discuss my feelings and promoted further discussion of the critical learning events and reflections made on my approach/achievements/areas for improvement.

Value of peer coaching

Lastly, there were numerous comments on the overall value of peer coaching. Individuals found the process of coaching integral to their success in the program.

To me peer coaching was one of the most valuable learning experiences I have undertaken. In reflection, through reviewing my learning journal entries I was able to understand how, through working with John (fictitious name) (my PC), I had endeavoured to achieve my learning objective.

This [peer coaching] exercise has also made me realise the importance of open communication with other staff members. ... I have always assumed their immediate line manager should be responsible for keeping them informed of upcoming projects. However, by looking at my situation from a different perspective, and also by trying to picturing myself in their position and trying to see things from their angle, I have realised that with respect to my own projects, I also have a responsibility to be open and ensure they know what is being proposed. This has encouraged more open lines of communication with them which has been appreciated.

Summary

This study provides evidence that an integrated learning strategy, that is driven by work based assessment can increase the transfer of training into the professional practice environment. Participant's reported positive application of theoretical and professional skills in a situated context following an eight week experiential activity. The integrated learning strategy comprised of goal setting, reflective journaling and peer coaching supported transfer of training into the workplace. Noteworthy learning outcomes in areas such as communication skill, conflict management and negotiation, coaching, project management, time management and leading and facilitating teams were reported.

Participation in this experiential learning strategy also provided learners with skills to manage their own life long learning, another key professional skill.

The experiential focus of the program, along with the integrated learning strategy appeared to be an effective and low cost approach for promoting transfer of training. Learning outcomes, and in particular professional skills, as reported by participants appear to extend beyond single loop learning outcomes to double loop outcomes. Participants reported different ways of managing themselves and others along with enhanced skills in several of the professional skills desired by business.

The results of this evaluation suggest that an integrative learning strategy can very effective in building professional skills in post-graduate students when access to situated contexts is available. Research and evaluation is needed in undergraduate populations where access to situated contexts may be limited. However, in programs where fieldwork is part of the curriculum (for example, health sciences) peer coaching may be a very useful strategy to promote transfer of training.

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