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There is common agreement about the importance of workplace learning. Discussions about the topic have mostly focused on two major components: formal training and informal learning. These components have become the defining features of workplace learning. This article proposes a conceptual framework of workplace learning that is comprised of the interaction of three variables: 1) the location of the learning; 2) the extent of planning that has been invested in developing and delivering the learning experiences; and, 3) the role of the trainer, facilitator, or others during the learning process. The need for the proposed framework stems from two concerns. First, formal training and informal learning represent incompatible levels of discourse, making it difficult to have a cohesive understanding of workplace learning. Second, workplace learning appear to exclude a large segment of HRD practice, particularly when formal training programs occur in the work setting.

Keywords: workplace learning; conceptual framework

There is common agreement about the critical importance of workplace learning in organizations (Clarke, 2005; Jacobs, 2003; Lohman, 2005). As such, the topic has received much attention among human resource development (HRD) scholars and practitioners alike, mostly focusing on two major components: formal training and informal learning. In effect, these components have become the defining features of workplace learning. This article proposes a conceptual
framework of workplace learning that is comprised of the interaction of three variables: (a) the location of the learning, (b) the extent of planning that has been invested in developing and delivering the learning experiences, and (c) the role of the trainer, facilitator, or others during the learning process. The need for the proposed framework stems from two concerns. First, formal training and informal learning represent incompatible levels of discourse, making it difficult to have a cohesive understanding of workplace learning. Second, definitions of workplace learning appear to exclude a large segment of HRD practice, particularly when formal training programs occur in the work setting.

We define workplace learning as the process used by individuals when engaged in training programs, education and development courses, or some type of experiential learning activity for the purpose of acquiring the competence necessary to meet current and future work requirements. The definition assumes the need to balance, though not always equally, the needs of organizations, which provide the context for the learning, with the needs of individuals who may undertake the learning to advance their own work-related interests and goals (Jacobs, 2001; Muhamad & Idris, 2005; Swanson & Holton, 2001). Workforce learning may be the most inclusive term used to describe the many ways that employees learn in organizations. Training typically refers to a single program of some kind. Employee development has come to represent a range of learning opportunities that focus on accomplishing broad career or professional goals (Jacobs & Washington, 2003; Noe, 2008). Similarly, talent development involves learning through multiple programs and experiences, often involving role plays and simulations, with an emphasis on acquiring the underlying competencies required for a position (Thorne & Pellant, 2007).

The proposed framework seeks to build on the invaluable contributions of the current literature on workplace learning. Yet continued scrutiny is warranted, given the foundational nature of the topic in the HRD field. Specifically, the article first discusses the context of workplace learning as it relates to the need to understand the changing nature of work and implications on managing employee competence. Next, the article briefly reviews current understandings of workplace learning. Third, the article discusses two major concerns about current understandings of workplace learning. Fourth, the article proposes the conceptual framework of workplace learning. Finally, the article discusses the implications of the framework are discussed for theory building and research in HRD. Our underlying goal is to help promote a dialogue such that the process will stimulate the development of new theory building and research.

**Changing Nature of Work and Employee Competence**

Workplace learning might be best understood from the context of the changing nature of work and the resulting employee competence issues. We
suggest that this perspective better aligns workplace learning with the on-going challenges of organizations. Two fundamental shifts can be observed in the work that people do. The first shift is that work has increasingly shifted towards using knowledge as an integral component (Ackerman, 1998). Knowledge work can be defined as when individuals receive information from a variety of sources, use that information to derive a set of solutions, and generate new sets of information as a result of their own inputs (Mohrman, 2003). Knowledge work often constitutes the manipulation of information along with objects or things. The trend towards knowledge work has been relatively pervasive across job levels, though sometimes to varying extent. Lee (2004) showed that movement toward knowledge work was noted across all positions in a bank setting, but it was most visible among customer-service bank employees than middle and senior managers.

The second shift is that work content has come to have shorter life cycles. That is, although jobs are undergoing change, the time between the change events is growing shorter. The relative volatility of work practices is often a second-order result when organizations undergo change in the way they operate. Osman-Gani and Jacobs (2005) reported that information technology was the major driver for prompting job change among companies in Singapore across all business sectors. The introduction of information technology, whether to enhance management or production capabilities, invariably causes major shifts in how work is arranged and done. For instance, lean manufacturing, a commonly used application of the Toyota production system in many organizations, represents a major organizational change effort that includes the Kaizen performance improvement process, invariably leads to substantial revisions of the workflows and how the work should be done.

These two ongoing shifts affecting work—the movement of jobs toward knowledge work and the shortened life cycle of the job content itself—have raised the need for organizations to better understand and manage employee competence. As shown in Table 1, Jacobs (2002) introduced a hierarchy of employee competence, starting at the lowest level of competence, the novice level, moving upwards to the highest level, the master level. The five categories suggest how individuals progress in their competence to perform a specific unit of work. In practice, fewer employees ever achieve the expert or master levels, simply because of the time involved to achieve that level combined with the frequency of job change. It is commonly observed that individuals may function at a relatively high level of competence for a period of time, then as some change is introduced, their level of competence drops to a much lower level, requiring some time and effort to regain their previous status.

How to manage the constant ebb and flow of job change, and to manage this on an ongoing basis, continues to challenge many organizations. Indeed, developing individuals from the novice level to the specialist level might be the most reasonable expectation for many organizations. The success in which an organization manages its employee competence may suggest as well the
organization’s overall competitiveness in the long term. Although managers often understand the importance of recruiting a qualified and skilled workforce at the outset, equally important is having systems in place that enable a response to ongoing changes in work over time. Beyond the absolute need to capably manage their physical and financial resources, organizations must also respond to their current and anticipated employee competence needs, mostly through some form of workplace learning, which have become the primary means to generate and disseminate this information to others.

Workplace Learning

This section briefly reviews current understandings of workplace learning. The section is not meant to provide a comprehensive review of the topic, but rather to highlight its most salient aspects. Table 2 summarizes the various definitions and respective themes found in the HRD literature. Numerous authors, such as Ellinger (2005), Lohman (2005), Boud and Garrick (1999), and Sambrook (2005), have discussed workplace learning and its accompanying issues at length. It is clear from these sources that workplace learning represents highly complex individual processes and organizational practices. In general, workplace learning has been described as the relationship between two significant human processes: working and learning (Barnett, 1999; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004; Sambrook, 2005). Barnett (1999) stated that work has necessarily become part of learning and learning in turn has become part of work. Barnett also asserted that the interrelationship between learning and working has to be worked out at different levels, namely at the organizational and personal, and in different modes, formal and informal.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) constructed a matrix of learning types which categorized learning based on intentional/planned and unintentional/unplanned aspects along with three criteria: learning that which is already

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Master</td>
<td>The real expert among experts. This person sets the standards for others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expert</td>
<td>One who can do both the routine and nonroutine cases of the work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced specialist</td>
<td>One who has performed the work repeatedly and can do it with ease</td>
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<tr>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>One who can reliably perform most work, but the range is limited</td>
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<tr>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>One who is new to the work and lacks the ability to meet requirements</td>
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**TABLE 2: Definitions and Key Themes of Workplace Learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Key Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Watkins and Marsick</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Workplace learning defined by formal, informal, and incidental learning</td>
<td>• Formal learning (training): discrete planned events</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Informal learning: not usually classroom-based or highly structured</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Incidental learning: an unintended by-product of some other activity</td>
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<td>Barnett</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Learning is inherent in work, and work is inherent in learning</td>
<td>• The interrelationships between learning and work has to be worked out at different levels</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(organizational and personal) and in different modes (formal and informal)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boud and Garrick</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>The purposes of workplace learning are presented rather than a precise definition of the concept</td>
<td>• Improving performance for the benefit of the organization</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Improving learning for the benefit of the learner</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Improving learning as a social investment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Billett</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Work practices serve to structure activities and guide in ways that influence the learning of the knowledge required for performance at work. These experiences are not informal or unstructured, incidental or ad hoc. Instead, they are structured by the requirements of work practice rather than the practice of educational institutions</td>
<td>• Formal learning</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Structured learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Goal-directed activity of the workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evans and Rainbird</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Workplace learning includes a range of formal and informal learning; learning which is directed to</td>
<td>• Initial work-based learning, in traineeships and apprenticeships for young people</td>
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</tbody>
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TABLE 2: (continued)

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<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
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<th>Definition</th>
<th>Key Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcom</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Workplace learning can be classified as being formal, informal, or nonformal, suggesting that it may be better to conceive formality and informality as attributes or characteristics in all learning situations</td>
<td>• Work-based degrees and foundation degrees (higher education such as associate degree)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Nonformal work-based learning (national vocational qualification, learning through work and community experience)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hodkinson and Hodkinson</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Workplace learning is sufficiently diverse and complex that no one theory, at least none yet fully developed can adequately deal with all its aspects. Within this complexity, only some types of workplace learning are susceptible to the clear identification of workplace learning</td>
<td>• Access to continuing nonformal learning opportunities through the workplace (on-line learning)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Formal learning</td>
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<td>• Informal learning</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Nonformal learning</td>
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<td>Clarke</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Workplace learning is formal, planned learning off the job</td>
<td>• Planned learning of that which others know</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Socialization into an existing community of practice</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Planned/intended learning to refine existing capability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Unplanned improvement of ongoing practice</td>
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<td>• Planned/intended learning to do that which has not been done before</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Unplanned learning of something not previously done</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Formal, planned learning off the job</td>
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(continued)
known to others, development of existing capability, and learning which is new in the workplace or treated as such. Then, they identified workplace learning as being of six types:

1. Planned learning which others know
2. Socialization into an existing community of practice
3. Planned/intended learning to refine existing capability
4. Unplanned improvement of ongoing practice
5. Planned/intended learning to do that which has not been done before
6. Unplanned learning of something not previously done.

Sambrook (2005) sought to clarify the meaning of workplace learning by distinguishing between learning at work and learning in work. Learning at work is associated with the provision of planned training and education courses. Learning in work is associated with the more informal processes that are embedded in an activity, such as observing, asking questions, problem solving, doing projects, mentoring and coaching others, and participating in ad hoc discussions. Sambrook further suggests that opportunities exist for learning outside the boundaries of the work setting, which might be called learning outside work.
Billett (2001) argued that labeling the work setting as an informal learning environment unnecessarily reinforces the ambiguous nature of this type of learning. Billett insisted that work practices are not fundamentally informal or unstructured, incidental, or ad hoc. Instead their nature is determined by the requirements of the work practices, which should be used as the referent for the behavior. Mocker and Spear (1982) used three principles to clarify the concept of lifelong learning: (a) who controls the learning objectives, (b) what is to be learned, and (c) how it is to be learned when classifying lifelong learning. Thus, understanding any one learning instance should be based, in part, on the locus of control of the situation at hand. They further suggest a model that presents four types of learning: formal learning (learners have little control over the objectives or means of learning), nonformal learning (learners control the objectives but not the means of learning), informal learning (learners control the means but not the objectives of learning), and self-directed learning (learners control both the objectives and means of learning).

Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcom (2003) proposed that workplace learning can be classified as being formal, informal, or nonformal. They suggested that it may be better to conceive formality and informality as attributes or characteristics present in all learning situations. They also identified four aspects of learning to group these attributes, the location of the learning, the process used, the purpose of the learning, and the content.

Clarke (2005) proposed that the most frequently described dimensions of workplace learning include planned versus unplanned learning, formal versus informal, nonformal versus incidental, and on-the-job versus off-the-job, as a way of distinguishing what might constitute workplace learning. The terms are mainly used to distinguish learning situations, but there remains some ambiguity because of the differing ways these concepts have been defined. For example, some authors have used the terms informal and incidental learning interchangeably or in ways that they are difficult to clearly distinguish.

In summary, the literature suggests that formal learning or training and informal learning are the most commonly agreed on components of workplace learning. Formal training is perhaps the most apparent aspect of workplace learning for most HRD scholars and practitioners. Formal training is composed of planned learning activities that are intended to help individuals acquire specific areas of knowledge, awareness, and skills. Formal training mostly involves institutionally sponsored and endorsed programs, which would include almost all training and development programs that organizations offer. Implicit in this understanding is that formal training occurs in a context specifically intended for learning, which mostly suggests that the learning occurs away from the actual work setting.

As stated, formal training is assumed to be planned in nature relying on the use of the systems approach to design the learning experience in such a way so that the outcomes can be achieved. Numerous systems approaches for developing formal training programs have been proposed, most of which are
composed of the basic phases of assessment, analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation. More recently, organizations that are involved with quality management systems have adopted the ISO 10015–Quality of Training Guidelines, which includes the following design phases:

1. Analyze performance problems
2. Identify training needs
3. Develop and plan the training
4. Provide for the training
5. Evaluate the training

In summary, formal training involves both the process used to design the learning experience and the nature of the program that results from the design process. Much recent attention has also been given to the notion of informal learning as a component of workplace learning (Boud & Garrick, 1999). Informal learning recognizes that the acquisition of knowledge and skills in the work setting does not occur from organized programs alone. Indeed, learning also occurs during critical moments of need embedded in the context of practice. In contrast to formal training, informal learning occurs in situations that are not usually intended for learning, most notably in the actual work setting. As a result, informal learning is said to call on and require a blending of individual difference constructs such as intellectual curiosity, self-directedness, and self-efficacy (Beckett, & Hager, 2002).

Informal learning arises in situations where learning may not be the primary aim of the activity, but is activated by some anticipated or existing problem situation that requires resolution. Informal learning may occur as a result of evolving activities including group problem solving, hypothesis testing, mentoring, coaching, and job shadowing. Although no one person may officially serve as the trainer or facilitator in any of these activities, informal learning may involve seeking out certain individuals who are recognized to have higher levels of insight or competence on a topic.

Informal learning may be undertaken by engaging with others or by embarking on some sort of self-initiated study. Most of this learning is unplanned and somewhat serendipitous in nature, because it occurs as needed. Lohman (2005) defined informal learning as involving those learning activities that employees initiate in the workplace, that involve the expenditure of physical, cognitive, or emotional effort, and result in the development of professional knowledge and skills. Similarly, Garavan, Morley, Gunnigle, and McGuire (2002) defined informal learning as the set of processes that occur within specific organizational contexts and focus on acquiring and assimilating an integrated cluster of knowledge, skills, values, and feeling that result in individuals and teams refocusing and fundamentally changing their behavior. Informal learning might also involve some form of sanctioned learning such as mentoring, coaching, job rotation, job shadowing, and special projects or assignment (Marsick & Watkins, 1997).
In addition to formal training and informal learning, the terms *incidental learning* and *nonformal learning* have been introduced as well. However, their acceptance and clarity of their meaning seems not to be at the same level as formal training and informal learning. Incidental learning is defined as learning that results from an unintended by-product of some other activity, such as trial-and-error experimentation or engaging in ad hoc interactions with others. Nonformal learning appears to share elements of both formal and informal learning (Eraut, 2000), as it may be planned, but it is not provided by an educational institution. The literature provides limited information on how to differentiate exactly among formal learning, informal learning, and nonformal learning, and it appears increasingly difficult to do so in practice as well.

**Emerging Concerns**

As stated, we view current conceptualizations of workplace learning to be inadequate because of two major concerns.

**Incompatible Levels of Discourse**

At first glance, formal training and informal learning may appear to be related because they broadly represent processes that somehow focus on individuals and the learning process. However, on closer scrutiny, it is difficult for us to reconcile the two components into a cohesive understanding of workplace learning. Consider that they do not represent an input/output relationship, such as learning and performance. Nor do they represent opposite ends of a spectrum, such as planned and unplanned. In essence, formal training and informal learning represent two fundamentally different sets of entering assumptions, prompts about when to engage in the actions, and expectations for the outcomes.

Formal training represents the actions of others to plan and implement programs. That is, formal training fundamentally refers to programs offered by organizations and the planning process used to prepare, deliver, and evaluate the programs. Informal learning represents the actions, often internal, of individuals when they engage in learning. On the other hand, informal learning fundamentally refers to the ad hoc decisions, actions, and emergent groupings of individuals when confronted with a learning need in the context of working.

The fundamental differences between formal training and informal learning have not gone unnoticed in the literature. Colley et al. (2003) noted that the problem is the complete lack of agreement about what constitutes informal and formal learning, or what the boundaries between them might be. Similarly, Clarke (2005) pointed out that the problem is the absence of any agreed definition of what actually constitutes the notion of workplace learning. Clarke further argued that a lack of conceptual clarity or specificity about workplace learning is noted as a barrier for deepening workplace learning studies.
Advances in HRD Practice

The second major concern focuses on recent advances in HRD practice, which current conceptualizations of workplace learning appears not to be able to adequately accommodate. Specifically, the notion of formal training suggests that planned programs can occur only in settings that are designated for learning, such as a training classroom, corporate university, hotel meeting space, or some other off-the-job setting. However, in practice, many HRD professionals now successfully combine characteristics of planned training with learning on the job.

Perhaps the most notable example of this is the training approach called structured on-the-job training (S-OJT). S-OJT is defined as the planned process of using experienced employees to train novice employees on a unit of work in the actual work setting or a setting that resembles the work setting (Jacobs, 2003). Other training approaches, such as planned coaching and mentoring programs, also do not fit well within current understandings of workplace learning. How to place these training approaches, among others, within current understandings of workplace learning suggests the inadequacies of relying solely on the formal training and informal learning distinction to define workplace learning.

Conceptual Framework of Workplace Learning

The primary focus of this article is to propose a conceptual framework of workplace learning. As presented in Table 3, the conceptual framework is comprised of three variables that represent a synthesis of the workplace learning literature and the realities of HRD practices in organizations. Table 3 defines each of the major variables and describes the ways in which they vary.
Each cell of the framework represents a set of experiences that have value in certain circumstances. Thus, the cells are presented as being value-free and not as being inherently positive or negative in meaning.

Briefly, off-the-job learning and on-the-job learning are characterized as the two levels which define the location of the learning. Off-the-job learning and on-the-job learning are characterized as the two levels which define the location of the learning.
learning occurs away from where the actual work is done, whereas on-the-job learning takes place near or at the actual work setting. In general, off-the-job learning occurs in an off-site classroom near the job setting, in a facility exclusively for training, or in a corporate or private facility far away from the work setting (Jacobs, 2003). The locations for on-the-job learning are environments that have not been necessarily designated for learning, but in which individuals learn naturally nevertheless (Beckett & Hager, 2002). The key aspect of on-the-job learning is that it represents what occurs in an experience-based situation. On-the-job learning is commonly described as informal learning because of the location in which it occurs.

The degree of planning is defined as the extent to which a systems approach was used to ensure that the intended learning outcomes were made explicit or presumed. The degree of planning varies in two basic ways: unstructured and structured. Whereas unstructured means that there is little or no evidence that a systems approach was used, structured indicates that there is evidence that a systems approach was used. The distinction made between means and ends is a prominent aspect of planned learning (Jacobs, 2003).

In this sense, the system view has two basic implications for workplace learning. First, it suggests that workplace learning is a system composed of several interacting parts that work together to achieve common goals. Second, it indicates that workplace learning should be developed and implemented systematically (Jacobs, 2003). Based on the systems approach, evidence that a systems approach was used can be identified in learning inputs, process, and outcomes. The learning inputs include the people involved, the learning location, the information about the work to be learned, and the communications technology used to deliver information about the work. Learning process involves the delivery of learning contents to learners. Learning outputs occur as a result of combining the learning inputs and learning process. Learning performance, work performance, and trainee development pertain to learning outcomes (Jacobs, 2003).

Unstructured planning is often characterized by an ad hoc or even serendipitous approach to learning. That is, there is uncertainty or lack of concern at the outset about the outcomes of the learning or the methods used for the learning. In a sense, unstructured learning might be viewed as being phenomenological in that whatever occurs during and after the training might be viewed as being acceptable. The experience may itself be sufficient to warrant the individuals perceiving value from the learning. In contrast, structured learning suggests the use of a systems approach to develop the learning. That is, a systems approach requires that the outcomes be specified first then the methods to achieve the outcomes are specified afterwards. Additionally, structured learning is occurred with highly structured objectives, contents, time, and support.

The role of trainer/facilitator is defined as the extent to which others are involved during the learning process. The role of others in this case involves
passive and active roles. Passive role means that the trainer/facilitator plays a limited role during the learning process requiring the trainee to engage another person as needed. The active trainer/facilitator role means that the other individual plays a direct role throughout the learning process.

Figure 1 presents a synthesis of the proposed framework by showing the interactions of the eight combinations. For instance, off the job/unstructured/passive cell represents that learning occurs away from the work setting without use of a systems approach, and with limited involvement of a trainer/facilitator. The examples of this learning may be study leave, paid educational leave, and professional attachments.

Off the job/unstructured/active refers to the notion that learning may occur away from the work setting, without using a systems approach, and with the direct involvement of a trainer or facilitator. Off the job/structured/passive learning means that learning occurs away from the work setting, using a systems approach, and with the limited involvement of a trainer or facilitator. Self-directed learning is the instance of this learning. The off the job/structured/active cell represents that learning occurs away from the work setting, as a result of using a systems approach, and with direct involvement of a trainer or facilitator. Group-based classroom, Web-based training, blended training, and corporate university are examples of this combination.
The on the job/unstructured/passive cell occurs at the actual work setting, without use of a systems approach, and with limited involvement of a trainer or facilitator. Casual coaching, ad hoc mentoring, job shadowing, learning while doing, communities of practice, and reflection-in-action may be examples of this form of workplace learning. On the job/unstructured/active learning is characterized as learning, which occurs at the actual work setting, without the use of a systems approach, and with the direct involvement of a trainer or facilitator. The most prominent instance of this learning might be called unstructured on-the-job training or follow Joe training. Clearly, there is a role for these training approaches in terms of allowing some degree of exploration and discovery. But the consequences of such training can be doubtful to organizations and the individuals involved.

The on the job/structured/passive cell represents learning occurs at the actual work setting as a result of using a systems approach and with limited involvement of a trainer or facilitator. Action learning may be considered an example of this category. Finally, the on the job/structured/active cell occurs at the actual work setting, as the result of using a systems approach, and with the direct involvement of a trainer or facilitator. S-OJT, formal mentoring, and formal coaching are examples of this category. Taken together, the eight cells provide a relatively comprehensive view on how to understand the various learning types used in organizations.

Implications for Theory Development and Research

The most prominent implication is that the proposed conceptual framework now identifies a set of integrated variables that comprise workplace learning. Given concerns expressed about the illusive nature of workplace learning (Clarke, 2005; Colley et al., 2003), the framework explicitly describes what variables should be included and how each of the variables vary. Explicating this information is a critical aspect of the theory development process (Dubin, 1978). Future refinement of the conceptual framework, based on research, depends on having a clear set of variables as a starting point.

It would be premature to suggest that the proposed conceptual framework should now be considered an emerging theory of workplace learning. The framework simply seeks to identify and describe the variables that comprise workplace learning and how each variable might be expected to vary. Thus, the conceptual framework at this point is purposely descriptive in nature.

Related to this point is the consideration of how gender, ethnic background, or cross-cultural preferences might influence the proposed conceptual framework. For instance, a growing number of scholars, especially in HRD, have posited that cross-cultural differences should be taken into account when considering training and learning in diverse contexts (e.g., Osman-Gani & Hyder,
2008). In this sense, future presentations of the framework might include additional dimensions to overlay onto the three basic variables presented here.

For example, as part of his analysis of cross-cultural variables, Hofstede (2001) has introduced at least five dimensions of national work-related values. One such variable, individualism versus collectivism, refers to the extent to which people are expected to stand up for themselves and to choose their own affiliations, or alternatively act predominantly as a member of a life-long group or organization. Latin American cultures rank among the most collectivist in this category, whereas Western countries are most individualistic cultures. How such individual differences tend to influence workplace learning should be considered of high importance for future HRD theory building and research.

Even without such additional dimensions, the proposed conceptual framework lends itself to the possibility of future theory development, perhaps more than ever before on this topic. The theory development process requires attention to a set of attributes (Dubin, 1978; Lynham, 2000). Undertaking the development and subsequent analysis of a theoretical model requires the identification of these attributes by which to judge the adequacy of the model. For example, Jacobs (1989) undertook an extensive analysis of the body of knowledge known as human performance technology using the theory development criteria as proposed by Patterson (1983).

The most fundamental attribute of any theoretical model is whether there exist units which constitute the content of the model. As stated, the proposed conceptual framework of workplace learning presents three major variables: degree of planning, location of the learning, and role of others during the learning. In effect, these variables could be viewed as the units, if the proposed framework should be viewed as an emerging theory. Future research should focus on establishing relationships among the variables, such that propositions could be proposed. In this sense, it would seem advisable to match combinations of the variables with certain outcome variables or individual different variables.

Conclusion

The conceptual framework was proposed to address two major issues related to current understandings of workplace learning. By doing so, the framework suggests the complementary nature of the ways in which learning occurs in organizations. That is, the framework shows how altering one variable or another makes it possible to change the nature of the learning approach, such that organizations might be able to make more informed decisions related to managing employee competence. This would seem true regardless if the learning approach was structured or unstructured in nature.

In the end, the proposed framework of workplace learning does not necessarily negate the validity of the terms formal training and informal learning, in particular. Indeed, these terms will likely continue to be used and have meaning
in the HRD field. However, their continued use to describe the broader entity of workplace learning seems certain to unduly constrain future theory development and research on the topic. How to advance the theory, research, and by extension the practice of HRD seems dependent on a meaningful understanding of workplace learning.

References


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