Measuring Learning Resistance to Workplace Training

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ABSTRACT

Training Transfer has been a topic bearing considerable mention over the past several decades. This article focuses on the connection between training transfer and learning resistance and presents research findings describing the design, creation, and testing of the Learning Efficiency Inventory (LEI). The LEI was designed to measure learning resistance and multiple correlates, such as resentment, overconfidence, disinterest, and perceived social norms in mandatory workplace contexts. This study represents early attempts at validation for the inventory itself as well as an explanatory model of learning resistance.

KEYWORDS

Learning Engagement, Learning Resistance, Training, Training Transfer, Workplace

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the present paper was twofold: to report on the development of a scale to measure the construct of learning resistance in workplace training and to present an agenda for future research. We begin with a brief overview of the training transfer literature and its connection to learning resistance, and then follow it with a more thorough conceptual analysis of that latter construct.

Training transfer has long been a fertile topic in the workplace training literature. It has been conceptualized as the process in which knowledge, skills, and attitudes employees learn in training are used in a practical way on the job (Salas, Tannenbaum, Kraiger, & Smith-Jentsch, 2012. As might be expected for such a broad concept, training transfer has been the subject of manifold theoretical models and associated empirical studies (e.g., Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Burke & Hutchins, 2008; Nijman et al., 2006; Pham, Segers, & Gijselaers, 2012; Richie, 1992).While there are many suggested causes of suboptimal training transfer, the transfer process itself has traditionally been identified as encompassing three components – training inputs, training outputs, and conditions of transfer (Baldwin and Ford, 1998). The present paper is concerned with the latter component–conditions of transfer.

As noted by Hutchins and Burke (2007), this *conditions of transfer* component has, itself, been broken into three areas of study: personal characteristics of the trainees (Colquitt, LePine, & Noe (2000), training intervention designs (Machin & Fogarty, 2004), and the role of work environments (Holdton et al., 2000; Lim & Johnson, 2002; Tracey et al., 1995). Consistent with our interest in the individual learner, we focus specifically on the first of these three - trainee characteristics.

Colquitt, LePine, and Noe (2000) provide an overview of personal characteristics as they relate to transfer and distinguish between broad personological factors--such as cognitive ability and self-efficacy--and situational characteristics, which take into account environmental and contextual factors that affect learners during the learning process. One of the most important personal factors which can impede the learning process is learning resistance, and learning resistance often resides at the intersection of the personal and the environmental. Using this framework then, learning resistance can be considered a personological condition of learning/training transfer. The following section examines the construct in more depth.

LEARNING RESISTANCE

Learning resistance can be broadly defined as, "*…a state in which a learner is not open to learning in a specific learning situation as demonstrated through either active rejection or passive disengagement*" (Taylor, 2014, p. 60). In defining learning resistance this way, emphasis is placed on the decontextualized constructs of *openness* and *engagement*, which diminishes its identification with a particular set of behaviors. Likewise, defined this way, learning resistance cannot be attached automatically or directly to agreeing with or accepting new information in a given learning situation. This is an important distinction because failing to define learning resistance in terms of engagement rather than acceptance has given rise to a dichotomy in the literature between those who think that learning resistance is a negative dynamic (e.g., McFarland, 2001) and those who think it is a positive dynamic (e.g., Giroux, 1983, 2001). By way of illustration, those approaching learning resistance from a critical orientation have long contended that learning resistance can be seen as a positive thing, which should be nurtured (Moore, 2007). This division between resistance as "good" and resistance as "bad" has been detrimental to its study because it has sharply divided scholarship between those trying to facilitate more of it and those trying to mitigate all of it.

Casualties of this schism are numerous, including a loss of focus, sacrificed collaborations, and a largely fragmented body of literature. There has been a loss of focus in the scholarship overall with some writing about it as a retardation of learning (Long, 1994), and others writing about it as a necessary component of an educated population (Giroux, 1983). Collaborations have not been easily envisioned between these two groups, who seem to be in opposition to one another's line of scholarship, and the loss of focus and collaboration has given rise to a body of literature that is not arranged in a conceptually coherent way.

By defining resistance as either active rejection or passive disengagement, its opposite construct can be viewed as openness, and in terms of learning, engagement. Engagement is essential to all learning (Marks, 2000) and refers to a, "degree of willingness to mobilize the necessary energies (i.e., physical, emotional, and psychological)" required for learning (Taylor, 2014, p. 57). Learning resistance can be visualized on an X and Y axis representing, respectively, passive-active and resistance-engagement (see Figure 1). While it is clear in looking at the diagram that the lines between these zones would be somewhat blurry in concrete terms, they illustrate some of the particular possibilities within the spectrum of engagement and resistance. Questions can also be raised about the effects of each of the zones on the teaching-learning transaction. These are theoretical concerns that fall outside the scope of this paper, but are mentioned here because they helped inform our investigation.

While learning resistance is defined here as an internal state of being closed off and not engaging in learning, this state is evidenced in the behaviors and cognitions of the individual learner. The terms "behaviors" refers to physical behaviors such as leaving the room, heckling the instructor,

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