

# Disillusioned by Experience: An Examination of the Role of Conceptual Change Frameworks in Workplace Learning Resistance

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the role that a priori conceptual frameworks play in fostering learning resistance by adult learners in a mandatory training context. In this qualitative study p/k-12 school teachers were interviewed about the views they held regarding in-service teacher training. Methods consisted of a taxonomic analysis with an imported concept, both from other sources. A taxonomic analysis is associated with grounded theory, and codes data using a taxonomy. The imported concept was a taxonomic framework taken from another source and was based on conceptual change research. The general purpose of the study was to populate the imported concept with participant data.

## KEYWORDS

Conceptual Change Theory, Engagement, Professional Development, Resistance

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of individual conceptual frameworks on engagement and resistance in learning contexts. That is, we were interested in the conceptual structures that teachers held prior to entering a training situation, and the role those pre-existing structures might play with regard to their reaction to the content, the trainer, and the overall program. In the following pages there will be some information indicating that many school teachers do not like their required in-service training, which is probably not surprising to anyone familiar with research on teachers. The reader should keep in mind that these findings are not the point we are intending to make, nor was it the impetus of this study. The intention of this study from its inception, was to examine the effects of individual conceptual frameworks, on engagement and resistance in learning contexts.

## Learning Resistance

Learning resistance has been addressed from a number of different perspectives over the years and the literature has been criticized for being very fragmented and difficult to harness toward any particular purpose (Atherton, 1999; Field & Olafson, 1999; Author, 2014). It is unnecessary to go into great detail in this article about all of the nuances of learning resistance, but it is essential that learning resistance be addressed broadly because while the bulk of the content here will refer to conceptual change theory and teacher in-service learning dynamics, our intention is to provide a very clear

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connection between these things and resistance to learning (for a full treatment of learning resistance, see Taylor, 2014). Perhaps more importantly, we wish to provide a way forward toward improved practice in training and education in mandatory learning contexts.

Oddly enough, our praxis leads us to begin by explaining what we do *not* mean by the term learning resistance. This is necessary because the term is used so many different ways and can refer to phenomena that might be exactly opposite what we mean here. What we do *not* mean when we refer to a learner as being resistant to learning is that the learner has refused to agree with specific content in a given learning situation. This is important to establish early on because it is our view that some of the students in a given course who might argue with the teacher the most strongly over content are actually the most engaged, while those who might smile and nod are actually a “thousand miles away.”

Instead, we view learning resistance 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). As such, the polar opposite of learning resistance is learning engagement. By defining it this way it can be viewed as a predominately negative dynamic from critical as well as non-critical perspectives. Being open to new learning but critically cautious with regards to its veracity is an educational tenet consistent with both critical and non-critical work. Consensus regarding the damaging nature of learning resistance as it is here defined, can give rise to a common view that it should be mitigated where possible in order for effective teaching and learning to take place.

There have been only a few attempts to provide resistance typologies, and the typologies that have been provided tend toward characterizing learning resistance by virtue of its cause rather than the form it takes (cf. Atherton, 1999; Quigley, 1997), and this is the case with the typology used in this present discussion. Taylor (2014) identifies four primary categories of learning resistance. Environmental Resistance refers to all learning resistance that is brought about by some factor(s) in the immediate locality of the learning event. This refers to all environmental distractions. Cognitive-psychological resistance refers to all learning resistance that is the result of predominantly internal mechanisms, such as low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, and defense mechanisms. Sociocultural resistance refers to learning resistance that is brought about as a result of either social factors, cultural factors, or some combination of the two. Resentment engendered as a result of some sort of race or gender discrimination is an example of this, as is resistance resulting from social dynamics such as peer pressure.

Lastly, epistemological resistance is resistance that arises as a result of a mismatch between the learner and teacher’s conception of what learning is. It is a “disconnect or mismatch between the learner’s and teacher’s conception or understanding of (a) what learning is and/or (b) what criteria should be used to evaluate truth claims” (p. 63). Learners, for instance, entering a workplace training course with the expectation that they will be taught to do something may become very frustrated if the point of the course actually to teach them to be something.

Resistance falling into this fourth category, epistemological resistance, was the focus of this study. Specifically, we were looking at how a learner’s perception of the purpose and nature of a given learning situation might negatively influence their openness to learning in that context.

## Mitigation Strategies

Mitigation strategies for learning resistance vary widely and range from very simple sets of steps to highly complex strategies of instruction. Building on the typology provided above, Taylor (2014) categorizes mitigation strategies along the lines of six different types of support – learning, structural, behavioral, instructional, interdisciplinary, and affective. A common thread through most or all of these different mitigation strategies in each of these categories, is a focus on changing the method of instruction or the systems of instruction overall. While these are valid, there is little mention of the overarching lens through which individual learners enter training situations and the effect that those lenses may have on the encoding and internalizing of learning content.

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