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Organizational Learner Presence Theory as a Factor in Training Modality Preference

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Abstract:

This paper examines theories relating to organizational learners, including adult learning theory, social presence theory, and the No Significant Difference Phenomenon. It compiles factors from these theories and evidence from prior research to develop and introduce organizational learner presence theory, which explains the training participation decisions made by organizational learners.

Keywords: *E-learning, mobile learning, workforce development, corporate training, organizational learner presence theory, organizational development, social presence*

1. Introduction

Organizational development is the theory and practice of systematically changing employee behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and values via the creation and reinforcement of employee training programs. Organizational training is any attempt to improve employee work performance, knowledge, skills, or abilities (DeCenzo, Robbins, & Verhulst, 2016). When choosing a training modality, training managers must consider whether face-to-face training, e-learning, or mobile learning will be most effective in increasing the learners' level of knowledge on the topic. They must choose the delivery method that will garner the most learner participation. They also consider learners' preference for one training modality over others, as that can drive learners' willingness to participate. This paper discusses the factors learners consider when selecting a training method, and proposes a new theory, organizational learner presence theory, that suggests why learners will choose one training modality over others and presents the assumptions that underpin those preferences.

2. Prior Studies

In the book, No Significant Difference Phenomenon, Russell reviewed over 355 training-related studies and identified a common theme throughout the 70 years of research examined. He established that there is no significant difference in training effectiveness based on variations in the training delivery methods or features (Russell, 1999).

One of the only published experiments to evaluate the comparative effectiveness of all three training modalities, face-to-face training, e-learning, and mobile learning, involved 103 study participants. Each participant received the same training module in one of the three modalities. Learning effectiveness was measured based on the difference in pre- and post-training assessment scores (Paul, 2014). The finding was consistent with Russell's (1999) no significant difference phenomenon. There was no significant difference in training effectiveness based on delivery method. Study participants learned at comparable levels in all three training modalities, whether or not they were trained in their preferred format. This finding was not affected by demographic characteristics such as gender, age, employment status, or education level (Paul, 2014).

3. Theoretical Underpinnings

Throughout Russell's composite study, the consistent theme identified was that "No matter what or who is being taught, more than one medium will produce adequate learning results and we must choose the less expensive media or waste limited educational resources" (Russell, 1999, p. viii). As the No Significant Difference Phenomenon demonstrates, regardless of the training delivery method, there is no significant difference in the learner outcomes (Russell, 1999), including the level training effectiveness as measured by knowledge gained (Paul, 2014).

Adult learning theory, or andragogy, popularized by Malcolm Knowles in 1980, (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) differs from standard pedagogy based on the older learner audience, and it makes five main assumptions. It assumes that the adult learners' maturity makes them capable of directing their own learning. They relate the training content to their own experiences. The assumption of new social, career and life roles, prepares the learner for new training. Adult learners are problem-centered and therefore desire to apply the training immediately. Lastly, it assumes that the adult learner is internally motivated to learn.

Social presence theory is the degree to which an individual is perceived to be a real person. It refers to the degree of salience, between two communicators using a communication medium (Lowenthal, 2015), with an increasing focus on

computer mediated communication (CMC). Social presence, or communicator salience, lies on a continuum that represents the interpersonal, emotional connection between communicators. On one end of the continuum, the communicators are perceived as real, and as the method of communication approaches the other end of the continuum, the communicators are perceived as less real. See Figure 1. Gunawardena & Zittle (1997) found social presence to be a significant predictor of participant satisfaction within CMC, with social presence contributing approximately 60% of the variance. Additionally, Richardson & Swan (2003) found that perceived learning was predicted by perceived social presence, which supports some learners' preference for face-to-face (FTF) training.

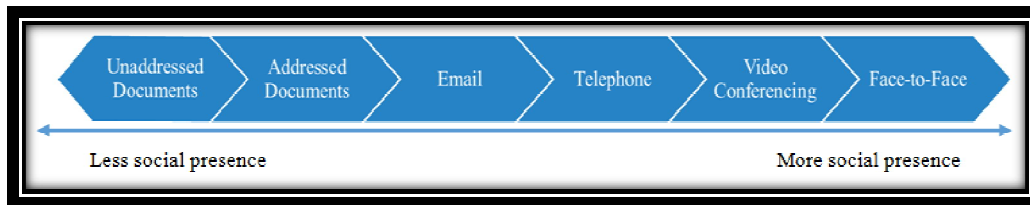


Figure 1: Social Presence Continuum

Organizational learner presence theory applies these prior education and communication theories in a workforce training context and relates them to the behaviors and preferences employee learners. Organizational learner presence theory maintains the assumptions of adult learning theory. It adds sixth and seventh assumptions, that learners prefer, select and participate in training based on perceived quality, learning, satisfaction, and value of the social presence associated with the training modality. Learners prefer training that allows them to create and maintain positive organizational learner presence and avoid negative organizational learner presence. Therefore, learners' preference or selection of training modality reflects their effort towards impression management. As organizational training is increasingly delivered via electronic means, as webinars, e-learning, and mobile learning, employees must strategically choose the training modality that allows them the greatest level of satisfaction, effectiveness, and positive visibility. Both satisfaction and perceived effectiveness are predicted by the perceived social presence.

A learner's social presence is positive when it allows the learner to be seen in a favorable manner by the participants in the training intervention, the fellow learners and the instructor. Examples of positive organizational learner presence (OLP) in training includes such learner behaviors as correctly responding to questions, asking thought-provoking questions, being seen a simultaneously knowledgeable and knowledge-seeking, demonstrating high levels of technological knowledge and skills, building rapport with fellow learners and the instructor, providing feedback, examples, and inferences based on the training material, the business environment, and organizational practices. See Figure 2. All of these result in the learner creating and maintaining a favorable impression, which coupled with good job performance and a positive professional brand, can lead to consideration for new, beneficial work opportunities, such as the opportunity for more or higher-level training, invitations to participate in high-visibility workgroups and projects, and even promotions. According to Prossack (2018), when considering employees for promotion, managers generally select employees who:

- Are self-motivated
- Have a quantifiable positive impact
- Take on responsibility
- Offer solutions instead of complaints
- Consistently demonstrate good people skills in the form of communication, listening, conflict resolution, and attitude
- Proactively pursue learning opportunities
- Solicit both positive and developmental feedback

Learners perceive different training modalities as having difference levels of risk for negative organizational learner presence. Negative organizational learner presence refers to anything that creates an unfavorable impression of the learner, disrupts others' learning, or demonstrates undesirable personal or professional characteristics. Examples of a negative organizational learner presence include an obvious lack of preparation, exposure of inadequate technological skills, tardiness, an exposed lack of knowledge or learning ability, and poorly phrased questions or comments.

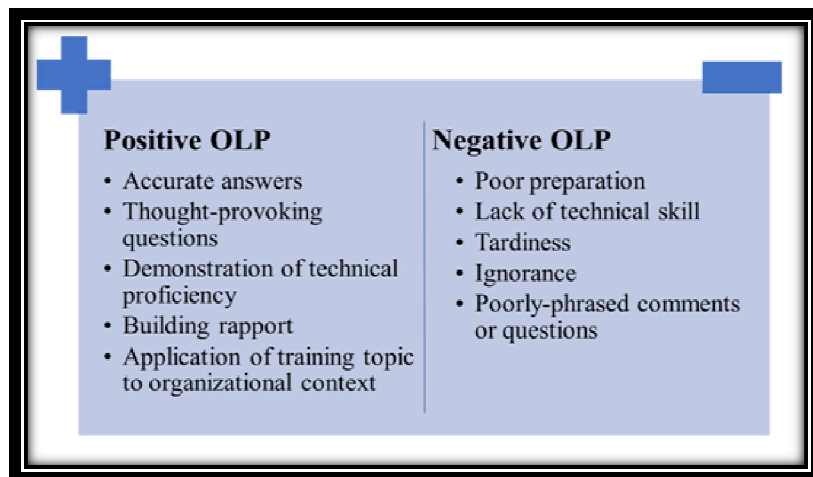


Figure 2: Examples of Positive and Negative Organizational Learner Presence

4. Organizational Learner Presence Theory

Most organizational learners prefer one training modality over others, many even insisting that they cannot learn as well in a different format. However, an experimental study conducted at Bowie State University demonstrated the contrary. A sample of 103 study participants was given the same training module in one of three formats: as face-to-face (FTF) training, e-learning, or mobile learning. Participants completed a pre-assessment prior to training and a post-assessment after the training intervention. Training effectiveness was measured by the change in score between pre- and post-assessment. An ANOVA was performed to determine whether there was any significant difference in mean change in score among the three training modalities. The effect of training modality on the mean change in score of each group was not significant; $p = 0.192$. The three training modalities are similarly effective. There is not a statistically significant difference in training effectiveness among FTF training, e-learning, and mobile learning (Paul, 2014). Of the sample ($N = 103$), 51 of the training participants received training in their preferred format. A test of between-subjects' effects on change in score resulted in no main effects for training method, training preference, or interaction; $p > 0.05$. Training effectiveness was not impacted by learners receiving training in their preferred modality.

Learners' training modality preferences may be explained by organizational learner presence theory, which makes seven assumptions:

- Organizational learners' maturity makes them capable of directing their own learning.
- They relate their training to their own experiences.
- The assumption of new social, career and life roles prepare the learner for new training.
- Adult learners are problem-centered and therefore desire to apply the training immediately.
- Organizational learners are internally motivated to learn. (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).
- Learners prefer, select, and participate in training based on perceived value, learning, satisfaction, and type of the social presence they associate with the training modality.
- Learners prefer training that allows them to create and maintain positive organizational learner presence and avoid negative organizational learner presence.

When choosing a training format, learners consider multiple decision factors, including the likelihood that they will demonstrate positive OLP or mitigate the risk of negative OLP. Learners assess the value of the training in terms of how the information will benefit them immediately and in the future. They will determine whether the information, experience, or exposure they stand to gain is worth the opportunity cost. They consider whether and how quickly they will grasp the information presented in the training. Lastly, they consider whether the experience of participation in the training is likely to be pleasant as its objectives are fulfilled.

5. Conclusion

This article has presented organizational learner presence theory, an amalgamation of adult learning theory, social presence theory, and the No Significant Difference Phenomenon as a viable framework to explain the training selection behaviors of organizational learners. It encapsulates the assumptions and considerations in an organizational, impression management, and career-focused context.

When selecting the format in which to complete organizational training, learners engage in a type of SWOT analysis. They consider whether the training will allow them to showcase or leverage their strengths while concealing their weaknesses. Learners consider the opportunities that could arise from their participation in training in each of the possible formats. Those opportunities can include exposure, demonstration of positive OLP, consideration for advancement opportunities, and receipt of valuable new information. Yet, learners are also cautious of the possible threats they perceive, including the opportunity cost of falling behind in their primary work tasks during the time they spend completing the training, as well as the possibility that they may demonstrate negative OLP in the training format. These considerations support organizational learner presence theory as an explanation for learners' training format selection decisions. Further research should be conducted to survey learners directly about their training format decision criteria.

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