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LEARNING DELIVERY

The intersectionality of impression management and organizational learner presence

Through an understanding of organizational learner presence theory, learning and development practitioners can optimize training participation levels, learner satisfaction and ROI.

Dr. Tyechia Veronica Paul

November 1, 2021



Organizational learners make training participation decisions in part based on impression management factors related to the training delivery method and the perceived professional benefit.

This article presents organizational learner presence theory as an amalgamation of andragogy, social presence theory, organizational citizenship behavior and impression management. It discusses the intersectionality of these theoretical underpinnings and implications for understanding organizational learners' training participation behaviors. With U.S. companies spending more than \$100 billion annually to train their workers, knowledge of organizational learner behavior and organizational learner presence theory is valuable in industry and academia. This article presents a new theory of organizational learner presence and purports its applicability to practitioners and academics.

Organizational training

Organizational training includes all efforts made to improve employee performance, knowledge, skills or abilities, and it is generally delivered in three primary modalities: face-to-face, e-learning or mobile learning. Organizational learners are employees and therefore usually adult learners who receive training through their jobs.

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Many organizations offer training in multiple formats to both satisfy the organization's needs and to garner as much employee participation as possible, regardless of whether the training is mandated. When choosing a training modality, training practitioners consider such factors as effectiveness, cost efficiency, and learner preference. Learners' preference for one training modality over others can influence their training participation decisions.

The \$100 billion spent by companies on workforce training is divided among three categories. Of those funds, 61 percent is spent internally for the maintenance and administration of training departments. This includes corporate trainers' salaries and learning management systems. Twenty-six percent is spent externally on the procurement of training products and 13 percent is spent on tuition reimbursement.

Theoretical underpinnings

Adult learning theory, or andragogy, differs from standard pedagogy based on the age learner. Andragogy makes five primary assumptions of adult learners. It assumes that adult learners' maturity makes them more capable than younger students of directing their learning. Adult learners relate training to their own experiences. Their assumption of new social, career and life roles help prepare them for training. Adult learners desire immediate applicability of knowledge gained in training to put that information to use solving problems. Lastly, andragogy assumes that adult learners are internally motivated.

Social presence theory provides a framework to understand the degree to which an individual is perceived to be a real person by examining the degree of salience between two communicators using a communication medium. According to this theory, social presence, or communicator salience, lies on a continuum representing the interpersonal, emotional connection between the communicators. One end of the continuum reflects the perception of real communicators, such as in face-to-face communication. The opposite end of the continuum reflects the perception of the communicators being less real. Within computer-mediated communication, social presence has been found to be a significant predictor of participant satisfaction, with social presence contributing approximately 60 percent of the variance. Additionally, perceived learning was positively correlated to perceived social presence, which supports the preference that some learners have for FTF training.

Figure 1. Social Presence Continuum

Through impression management people strive to influence the images that others have of them. Originally, impression management, or self-presentation, focused on face-to-face interactions, but it is also applicable to computer-based interactions. There is a significant volume of research on how impression management behaviors facilitate positive images, but there is less research on the risk of unintended negative consequences of impression management behaviors.

The five strategies of impression management include ingratiation, self-promotion, exemplification, supplication and intimidation. The act of choosing to participate or not participate in a training format is a conscious — and often strategic — decision in which the learner balances their learning needs with the needs and opportunities for positive visibility. They balance the opportunity for creating a positive impression against the risk of inadvertently making a negative impression.

Figure 2. Impression Management Strategies

Organizational citizenship behavior refers to individual employees' behavior that is optional, voluntary, discretionary and therefore not directly tied to the firm's formal rewards system. OCB includes all positive, constructive, elective employee actions that exceed the scope of their job descriptions. When performed in aggregate by multiple employees, OCB promotes effective organizational

performance. There are five common types of OCB: altruism, courtesy, sportsmanship, conscientiousness and civic virtue.

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Organizational learner presence theory

Organizational learner presence theory maintains the assumptions of andragogy while adding a sixth and seventh assumption: that learners prefer, select and participate in voluntary training based on perceived quality, learning, satisfaction and value of the social presence associated with the training modality. To demonstrate OCB while managing their impressions, learners prefer training that allows them the opportunity to create and maintain positive OLP and avoid negative OLP.

OLP is positive when it allows the learner to be seen in a favorable manner by training stakeholders, including other learners, the instructor, colleagues and managers. Examples of positive OLP in training include answering questions correctly, asking informed questions, being simultaneously seen as both knowledgeable and knowledge-seeking, demonstrating technological proficiency and building rapport with others. Through these behaviors, learners create and maintain a favorable impression.

When supported by job performance, positive OLP can lead to the learner being considered for new work opportunities such as invitations to participate in high-visibility workgroups and projects, and even promotions. When making promotion-related decisions, managers select employees who are self-motivated, take initiative, offer solutions rather than complaints, proactively pursue learning opportunities, have a quantified positive impact, demonstrate good interpersonal and communication skills, and solicit both positive and constructive feedback.

Negative OLP refers to anything that creates an unfavorable impression of the learner or demonstrates undesirable personal or professional characteristics. Examples of negative OLP include being unprepared, tardiness, a severe lack of knowledge, technical skills or learning ability and poor communication skills. Learners often perceive different training modalities as having different levels of risk for negative OLP, and will therefore avoid training in those formats in an effort of self-preservation. Learners' preference for or selection of a training modality reflects their effort toward impression management and their need to balance risk versus reward considerations.

One study, conducted at Bowie State University, explored if training effectiveness varied based on whether or not learners received instruction in their preferred format. Consistent with Russell's no significant difference phenomenon, there was no significant difference in training effectiveness among the three primary training modalities. Effectiveness was also not impacted by learners receiving training in their preferred modality. In practice, however, organizational learners often vocalize strong preferences for one training modality over others.

To a large degree, learners' training modality preferences can be explained by organizational learner presence theory, an amalgamation of social presence theory, andragogy, impression management and the theory of organizational citizenship behavior. OLP theory makes seven assumptions of organizational learners.

OLPT is applicable to organizational training and development practitioners throughout all industries, and understanding this theory provides new insights into adult learner behavior, which can be leveraged to increase voluntary participation in employer-provided training

through more effective internal marketing.

Training during the Covid-19 pandemic

FTF training offerings have decreased dramatically since the COVID-19 pandemic, despite it being the preferred format for 54 percent of adult learners. Learners' preference for FTF training can be attributed to the high degree of social presence and the opportunity for physical visibility among and proximity to training stakeholders.

During the pandemic, organizations focused more on the delivery of e-learning and mobile learning, which are normally socially distanced, and covid-friendly. With the limited availability of FTF training, practitioners must market the efficacy of electronic training modalities and how they synthesize the interactions and opportunities that are pertinent to learners' training participation decisions. If organizations fail to understand OLPT and market their training opportunities accordingly, they risk a



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decline in training participation levels. Decreases in the number of training participants would also decrease the return on investment of internal training teams, making it difficult to justify the costs of maintaining an internal training department.

The [Association for Talent Development](#) set forth some practical strategies for applying andragogy in marketing organizational training opportunities. Those strategies include being upfront and transparent about how the skills and knowledge gained from the training can be applied, building in interactive exercises to increase engagement among learners, and turning training into problem solving, like professors do when utilizing case studies as instructional tools. Organizational learning professionals must communicate how the learner experience in distance-based training is similar to the FTF experience, and be transparent about how they are dissimilar.

In addition to its value for practitioners, OLP theory is equally valuable for academics to understand and support university students, particularly graduate and [undergraduate post-traditional adult learners](#). When academics understand how both traditional students and GUPTAL choose their class formats, faculty are better equipped to provide greater value for students and optimize student engagement. Professors are often encouraged to align teaching practices with pedagogy. However, pedagogy is minimally applicable to college students, making such alignment less effective. By age 18, students are adults and show [no significant psychological or sociological differences](#) from their over 25-year-old counterparts. Therefore, it is important to apply andragogy, rather than pedagogy, to the instruction of university students.

Through an understanding of OLP theory, training practitioners can optimize training participation levels, learner satisfaction, and ROI. Additionally, academics can better tailor instruction to meet adult learners' needs and preferences, thereby providing greater value through application of organizational learner presence theory.



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