

Culturally Proficient Professional Learning to Enhance Learning Transfer: Guidance for Superintendents

Corinne Brion, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Educational Administration
School of Education and Health Sciences
University of Dayton
Dayton, OH

Abstract

Superintendents provide resources so that their district teams, principals, and teachers receive quality and frequent professional learning opportunities. As a result, it is crucial that the money invested in professional learning yields a return on their and their constituents' investments through improved academic achievement, teacher and students well-being, and teacher and leader retention. In other words, it is essential that the knowledge, skills, and abilities learned during professional learning be applied to the classrooms and schools. Culture is a predominant force in people's life that impacts learning and thus culture influences learning transfer. The culturally proficient professional learning (CPPL) framework and the Multidimensional Model of learning transfer (MMLT) are research-based and culturally grounded practical frameworks that superintendents can use prior, during, and after professional learning to maximize learning transfer and get a return on their investments while also improving students learning outcomes and all stakeholders' well-being.

Keywords

Culturally Proficient Professional Learning, learning transfer, educational leadership, multidimensional model of learning transfer, PK-12, superintendent

Superintendents wear many hats. One of their responsibilities is to provide resources so that their district teams, principals, and teachers receive quality and frequent professional learning (PL) opportunities. PL is at the center of the practice of improvement because it develops teachers and educational leaders' skills and abilities in order to impact student academic achievement. Superintendents spend a large portion of their budget (typically 60-65%) on instruction and instruction-related items such as PL (AASA, Budget 101).

As a result, it is crucial that the money invested in PL yields a return on their and their constituents' investments through improved academic achievement, teacher and students well-being, and teacher and leader retention. In other words, it is essential that the knowledge, skills, and abilities learned during PL be applied to the classrooms and schools. Too often, the knowledge gained during PL does not get implemented. This may be due to the lack of attention paid on learning transfer (Saks & Belcourt, 2006).

The culturally proficient professional learning (CPPL) framework and the Multidimensional model of learning transfer (MMLT) (Brion, 2021) are research-based and culturally grounded practical frameworks that superintendents can use prior, during, and after PL to maximize learning transfer and thus get a return on their investments while also improving students learning outcomes and all stakeholders' well-being.

Professional Learning

While PL requires time, it is crucial that the time be organized, carefully structured, and purposefully led to avoid the waste of human and financial resources. Too often, budgets are spent on PL that yield little results (Hess, 2013). Despite the millions of dollars spent on

PL nationally, student learning outcomes continue to stagnate or dwindle, discipline issues continue to skyrocket, and teacher moral plummets (Hess, 2013). This may be due, in part, to leaders paying little attention to culturally proficient PL that accounts for learning transfer (Alfred, 2002).

"Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, 2011, p. 3). Because learning is a social endeavor and knowledge is contextual, people's cultures impact the way they learn, interact, communicate, and resolve conflicts (Lindsey et al., 2018). Culture also impacts learning transfer because if people do not learn due to language barrier or the non-respect of traditions and preferred learning styles (collectivistic versus individualistic for example), they will not be able to implement the new knowledge to their jobs.

If culture is embedded before, during, and after PL, teachers will understand what they can do in their classes to become culturally competent and equitable. CPPL and MMLT were designed to promote cultural awareness by respecting participants' cultures when planning, organizing, conducting, and evaluating PL events. In CPPL, educational leaders understand the role culture plays in our learning because knowledge is a socially constructed process that cannot be divorced from learners' social contexts.

Superintendents also understand that the ultimate goal of teaching is the implementation of the newly acquired knowledge in order to enhance student learning. The MMLT is an innovative practical model intended to help superintendents and educational leaders organize, deliver, and evaluate their PL while also enhancing learning transfer.

Learning Transfer: The Missing Link to Effective PL

Learning transfer, also referred to as training transfer, is defined as “the effective and continuing application by learners—to their performance of jobs or other individual, organizational, or community responsibilities—of knowledge and skills gained in learning activities” (Broad, 1997, p. 2).

The American Society of Training and Development estimated that the USA alone spent \$125.88 billion on employee learning and development in 2009 (American Society of Training and Development, 2010). Yet, only 10% of the money invested in training results in transfer of knowledge, skills, or behaviors in the workplace or at home (Broad & Newstrom, 1992). Although the idea that only 10% of the money spent yields changes in practices has been disputed (Saks & Belcourt, 2006), these researchers agree that the money invested in developing employees’ human capital yields low to moderate results at best.

Being able to transfer newly acquired knowledge is the ultimate goal of PL, yet it is the most challenging to achieve (Thomas, 2007). Although scholars have had difficulties measuring learning transfer and its impact, seminal authors have written about what promotes and inhibits the transfer of learning (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Broad & Newstrom, 1992; Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Holton et al., 2000; Knowles, 1980).

Baldwin and Ford (1988) were the first to categorize enhancers and inhibitors to learning transfer and organize them into three groupings: (1) the factors related to learners’ characteristics; (2) the factors pertaining to the intervention design and delivery; and (3) the factors affected by the work environment.

Broad and Newstrom (1992) identified six key factors that could either hinder or promote learning transfer: 1) program participants, their motivation and dispositions, and previous knowledge; 2) program design and execution including the strategies for learning transfer; 3) program content which is adapted to the needs of the learners; 4) changes required to apply learning within the organization and complexity of change; 5) organizational context such as people, structure, and cultural milieu that can support or prevent transfer of learning including values and Continuing Professional Development [CPD]; and 6) societal and community forces.

Holton et al. (2000) created, piloted, and validated in 24 countries a 16-factor Learning Transfer System Inventory (LTSI) based on 16 constructs (Table 1). The LTSI was designed as a pulse-taking diagnostic tool for training organizers. As with Baldwin and Ford (1988) and Broad and Newstrom (1992), each of these constructs can hinder or promote learning transfer.

Table 1*Learning Transfer System Inventory (LTSI) (Holton et al., 2000)*

Capability	Motivation	Work Environment
Content validity	Transfer effort: Performance expectations	Supervisor support
Transfer design	Transfer performance: Outcome expectations	Supervisor sanctions
Opportunity to use	Learner readiness	Peer support
Personal capacity	Motivation to transfer	Performance coaching
	Performance, self-efficacy	Personal outcomes: Positive
		Personal outcomes: Negative
		Resistance to change

Despite the considerable amount of literature on the factors influencing learning transfer, there are a limited number of research studies that examine the relationship between culture and the transfer of learning (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Closson, 2013; Rahyuda et al., 2014; Silver, 2000). Yang et al., (2009) asserted that the fundamental reason why culture impacts training is that learning is not only an individual intellectual activity but also a social process that takes place in certain cultural contexts.

These authors posited that cultural factors affect training events via the content and methods chosen, the selection of facilitators, and the trainee characteristics because each national culture has its learning style. Similarly, the trainers' expertise in the subject, credibility, and training style influence the trainees' motivation and learning efficiency (Hofstede et al., 2002).

Closson (2013), Caffarella and Daffron (2013), and Rahyuda et al. (2014) are among the few authors affirming a relationship between cultural factors and learning transfer. Closson (2013) posited that racial and/or cultural differences do not only impact learning (Raver & Van Dyne, 2017) and the training process (Yang et al., 2009), but that cultural differences also influence learning transfer.

Beyond an awareness of who is represented in the room socially and ethnically, Caffarella and Daffron (2013) suggested that the content of the materials should reflect the cultural differences to enable transfer. These authors asserted that learning transfer should be discussed within contexts because context affects the way we teach, what we teach, and how we teach. Moreover, Caffarella (2002) affirmed the necessity for trainers and facilitators to be culturally sensitive and understand norms, traditions, and cultures to facilitate the transfer of learning.

According to Caffarella (2002), the planning phase of a training is when facilitators can deliberately include culturally responsive approaches and determine how prominent his or her own cultural identity is in the training.

On the basis of the literature on culture's role in transfer, some authors argue that there is a need for a comprehensive, multidimensional, and unifying model of learning transfer that considers culture as a key factor (Raver & Van Dyne, 2017).

Therefore, I merged and extended existing models of learning transfer by proposing the MMLT. This new model is intended to help school leaders organize, deliver, and evaluate their PL while also enhancing learning transfer and leaders' cultural proficiency.

Based on the MMLT, I provide practical rubrics that will assist superintendents and their teams as they hire PL consultants and organizers. This model is salient for all schools and districts as diversity is expressed through

race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, creed, as well as additional elements that constitute culture.

Culturally Proficient Professional Learning and Multidimensional Model of Learning Transfer

The MMLT is based on data collected, analyzed, and synthesized over six years in educational institutions in five African nations. The MMLT adds to the seminal work of Broad and Newstrom (1992). For the MMLT I refer to Culture with a capital letter as it includes individual, sectional, departmental, organizational, regional, and national cultures as well as cultures related to a continent. I assert that Culture is the predominant enhancer and inhibitor to transfer and that Culture affects the entire learning transfer phenomenon (Author, 2021).

MMLT is composed of seven dimensions: Culture, Pretraining, Learner, Facilitator, Material and Content, Context and Environment, and Post-Training (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Multidimensional Model of Learning Transfer





A Multidimensional Model of Learning Transfer

PRETRAINING:

Orient supervisors & facilitators
 Explain that implementation is expected
 Learn about professional learning audience & goals

LEARNER:

Understand the cultural background of all stakeholders
 Understand that different learning styles will be present in the professional learning event
 Understand that different languages & writing might be present in the professional learning event

FACILITATOR:

Understand the cultural background of all stakeholders
 Understand that different learning styles will be present in the professional learning event
 Need to have the dispositions necessary to be an effective facilitator

CONTENT & MATERIALS:

Materials are evidence-based, culturally relevant, & contextualized
 Pedagogical approach used is adult-friendly; it should be based on how adults learn best
 Learn about professional learning audience & goals

CONTEXT & ENVIRONMENT:

All stakeholders understand the work environment and socio-cultural context
 Create a climate that fosters transfer
 Allow for peer contact and support

FOLLOW UP:

Tutor facilitated networks
 Use of mobile learning
 Use of coaching, e-coaching, PLCs, COPs
 Include detailed feedback, modeling, & reflection

In the MMLT, I propose that culture is the overarching factor that affects all other dimensions of learning transfer. I refer to culture as the individual, sectional, departmental, organizational, classroom culture, regional, and national cultures as well as cultures related to a continent. Ignoring cultural issues in schools present numerous risks including reinforcing stereotypes, increasing intolerance among groups, raising potential misunderstandings, escalating frustrations and defensiveness, as well as learners and facilitators withdrawals. I also believe that pretraining and post-training play a key role in promoting the implementation of knowledge. A description of the MMLT elements is provided below.

Culture

Culture incorporates the differential effects of age, gender, race, ethnicity, social class, religion, sexual orientation, and abilities. Superintendents and their teams need to become culturally proficient so that they can model for other stakeholders how to create cultures that are inclusive, equitable, and respectful of all cultures represented in their communities (Lindsey et al., 2018).

Pre-training

As Figure 1 indicates, pretraining includes the orientation of facilitators and other key stakeholders so that they can support the PL once it has begun. Pretraining also includes communicating expectations to facilitators and learners explaining who will benefit from training, stating that participants are accountable to implement new knowledge and sharing the schedule, goals, and information that is perceived as mandatory. For example, I found that in some African cultures, pretraining plays a key role in the learning transfer process because people in these particular societies prefer knowing in advance and in writing what will happen during the training, how it will be

led, and by whom. With these details in mind, leaders and PL organizers can adapt accordingly and enhance the learning transfer process.

Learner

Learners are the participants in the PL events. This dimension refers to understanding the learners' motivation, the cultural background of the facilitators and participants, and how history and social events affect stakeholders, including self, facilitator, peers, and colleagues. The learner category also includes understanding cultural differences in learning styles as well as language and writing differences. Learner is also comprised of the participants' beliefs and attitude toward their job, whether or not they have the freedom to act, and the positive consequences of that application. Finally, it involves the participants' belief of the efficacy of the knowledge and skills learned. In this dimension, leaders and PL organizers would seek to know how the learners learn best, learn about the participants' experiences, and how they intend to use the new information in their context.

Facilitator

Effective facilitators must understand the cultural background of the participants and oneself. It also includes how history and social events affect stakeholders (including self, students, peers, and colleagues). Facilitator also refers to the understanding of language and writing differences, setting goals, and the selection of participants. Superintendents and their leaders and facilitators should examine the biases they may have towards certain groups of people before teaching and gathering materials.

Content and materials

The PL content uses evidence based, culturally relevant, and contextualized materials. It also uses a pedagogical approach based on andragogy, or how adults learn best (Mezirow,

2000). Material and Content also involves using symbols and meaningful artifacts to cue and help recall. In this dimension, culturally proficient leaders would ensure that the content reflects the participants needs and cultural backgrounds. For example, if the PL event is about communicating with parents and families at school, the leaders and facilitators would ensure that participants from different cultural backgrounds share what is or is not appropriate in their cultures and contexts.

Context and environment

This element comprises the training environment and the work environment (micro and macro cultures within context), sociocultural context, transfer climate, peer contact, and the presence of social networks. It also refers to having enough time to transfer knowledge, the support for action, the resources, the freedom to act, and peer support. Finally, Context and Environment refers to the training incentives: intrinsic incentives such as providing educators with growth opportunities, and extrinsic incentives, such as reward or promotion. For this dimension, leaders and facilitators would consider the organizational culture. Is the school culture conducive to transferring new knowledge?

Follow-up

Post-PL is often overlooked and is necessary to avoid skill decay and relapse. Examples of follow up include tutor-facilitated networks via mobile technology (Author, 2018), micro-learning using mobile technology, coaching, testimonials, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) or Community of Practice (COPs), apprenticeships, coaching, and E-coaching. Trainees' reports and assessing transfer also help to create a culture where learning and its application is valued. For example, follow-up can be done during teacher-based meetings or PLCs. It should take into

consideration the participants' preferred styles of learning and communicating.

Understanding how the various cultures of PL participants practically impact the dimensions of the MMLT could help leaders and teachers implement new knowledge, improve student learning outcomes and well-being while also supporting a better return on districts' and schools' investments. In addition to the return on investment, if superintendents were to utilize the MMLT as a framework for their districts' professional learning, they could enhance the implementation of the knowledge and skills gained during these events while also developing the cultural proficiency of district and school teams.

Implications for Practice

I have two recommendations for superintendents to increase the skills and abilities of adult learners, enhance learning transfer post PL, and get a return on investment that would in turn positively affect students' outcomes.

First, to provide PL that accounts for culture before, during, and after PL events, superintendents and educational leaders should consider using the MMLT and its rubric to organize, prepare, and evaluate their PL offering (see Appendix A). This rubric is designed to help practitioners think through the seven dimensions of the MMLT before, during, and after the training. Within each of these dimensions, there are several items practitioners can self-assess.

For example, during the pretraining phase, school leaders and PL organizers should reflect on the culture of their participants and how they learn best. This is important because this step affects the content and the delivery of the materials. Leaders should also conduct a needs assessment and offer culturally proficient

PL that is relevant and individualized to each teacher's needs. Because learning is a social endeavor, the MMLT and its rubric enable leaders to take culture into consideration for each of the MMLT dimension for maximum learning transfer and impact on student learning.

Second, it is necessary for facilitators to remain flexible and open to learning about different cultures and adjust their practices accordingly without judgment. It is also key that facilitators reflect on the impact their culture has on participants and colleagues in terms of language, history, and traditions. When organizing PL, superintendents and their teams should carefully select the facilitators, brief them on team members, and provide them with the MMLT.

Conclusion

Culture plays a key role in students' and adults' ability to learn and implement new knowledge because learning is a social endeavor. Current PL offerings seldom consider the culture in the learning transfer process. Because of the lack of attention placed on learning transfer, PL does not often yield changes in practice. By

forgetting to account for learning transfer in the organization, delivery, and follow-up of PL events, teachers and leaders often become frustrated and lose interest in the PL. PL offerings would be most impactful and yield a return on investment if all dimensions of the PL took culture into consideration. CPPL is a framework grounded in culture. CCPL aims to enhance the learning transfer by using the MMLT. The MMLT can serve as an innovative lens to prepare, organize, and evaluate the trainings in order to promote learning transfer. The rubric deriving from the model could also assist superintendents and training organizers in enhancing learning transfer before, during, and post-training.

Understanding the role culture plays in PL and in the learning transfer process would promote the transfer of learning in schools and would contribute to better academic outcomes and well-being outcomes for all students, teachers and leaders regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, language, abilities, and cultural backgrounds. In this way, MMLT would help superintendents promote equity and create socially just educational systems.

Author Biographies

Corinne Brion is an assistant professor at the University of Dayton. She earned her PhD in educational leadership at the University of San Diego. Her research interests include investigating the process of learning transfer among adult learners so to understand what enhances and hinders the transfer of knowledge in different contexts. E-mail: cbrion1@udayton.edu

References

- Alfred, M. V. (2002). Linking the personal and the social for a more critical democratic adult education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2002(96), 89-96.
- Author (2021). Title and journal omitted to maintain anonymity.
- Author. (2018). [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]. Keeping the learning going: using mobile technology to enhance learning transfer. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 1-16.
- American Society of Training and Development (2010). 2010 State of the Industry Report [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://www.td.org/research-reports/astd-research-2010-state-of-the-industry-report>
- Baldwin, T. T., & Ford, J. K. (1988). Transfer of training: A review and directions for future research. *Personnel Psychology*, 41(1), 63-105.
- Broad, M. L. (1997). *Transferring learning to the workplace: Seventeen case studies from the real world of training* (Vol. 5). American Society for Training and Development.
- Broad, M. L., & Newstrom, J. W. (1992). *Transfer of training: Action-packed strategies to ensure high payoff from training investments*. Boston, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Caffarella, R. S., & Daffron, S. R. (2013). *Planning programs for adult learners: A practical guide*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Caffarella, R. S. (2002). *Planning programs for adult learners: A practical guide for educators, trainers, and staff developers*. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. Indianapolis, IN: Jossey-Bass.
- Closson, R. B. (2013). Racial and cultural factors and learning transfer. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 137, 61-69.
- Hess, F. M. (2013). *Cage-busting leadership*. Harvard Education Press.
- Hofstede, G. (2011). Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede Model in context. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1014>
- Holton III, E. F., Bates, R. A., & Ruona, W. E. (2000). Development of a generalized learning transfer system inventory. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 11(4), 333-360. *Journal of Lifelong Education*, 28(2), 137-148.
- Knowles, M. (1980). My farewell address ... Andragogy no panacea, no ideology. *Training and Development Journal*, 34(8), 48-50.

- Lindsey, Randall B., Nuri Robins, K., Terrell, R.D., and Lindsey, D.B. (2018). *Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders*, 4th Ed., Thousand Oaks, CA.: Corwin.
- Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. Indianapolis, IN: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Rahyuda, A., Syed, J., & Soltani, E. (2014). The role of relapse prevention and goal setting in training transfer enhancement. *Human Resource Development Review*, 13(4), 413-436.
- Raver, J., & Van Dyne, L. (2017). Developing cultural intelligence. In K. Brown (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of workplace training and employee development* (pp. 407-440). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Saks, A. M., & Belcourt, M. (2006). An investigation of training activities and transfer of training in organizations. *Human Resource Management: Published in Cooperation with the School of Business Administration, the University of Michigan and in Alliance with the Society of Human Resources Management*, 45(4), 629-648.
- Silver, D. (2000). Songs and storytelling: Bringing health messages to life in Uganda. *Education for Health*, 14(1), 51-60.
- Thomas, E. (2007). Thoughtful planning fosters learning transfer. *Adult Learning*, 18(3-4), 4-9.
- Yang, B., Wang, Y., & Drewry, A. W. (2009). Does it matter where to conduct training? Accounting for cultural factors. *Human Resource Management Review*, 19(4), 324-333.

Appendix A

Sample Rubric for Practitioners

Appendix A shows one page of the pretraining rubric only and provides an example on how to score the first element on the aforementioned pretraining rubric.

Purpose

The purpose of the MMLT's rubrics is to help practitioners enhance the transfer of knowledge and skills to the workplace while promoting cultural proficiency.

Who can use these rubrics?




All stakeholders, PL organizers and facilitators are encouraged to use these rubrics before, during and after PL events.

How does it work?

These rubrics are designed to help practitioners think through 7 dimensions before, during and after PL events. These dimensions are culture, learner, facilitator, content and materials, context and environment, and follow-up. Within each of these dimensions, there are several items practitioners can check before, during, and after the PL session. One orange slice represents a 1 on Likert scale, 1 being the lowest score and 4 the highest. The half orange is a 2, the 3 quarters is a 3, and the full orange is a 4. For example, when looking at the sample pretraining rubric below, a full orange signifies that the leader organized a meeting with the facilitator(s) to review the content of the materials and ensure that the materials are culturally relevant for the audience. For the same item, a 2 may mean that the leader and facilitator(s) met but the leader did not go over the PL materials with the facilitator(s) (Example or pretraining rubric below).



A Multidimensional Model of Learning Transfer

SLICE	HALF	THREE QUARTERS	WHOLE
			

Pretraining:				
During the pretraining phase, I do the following:				
Facilitator meeting:				
I organize(d) a facilitators' meeting to review the PD materials.				
Summarize(d) an overview of the participants.				
Orient(ed) supervisors & facilitators to discuss goals, approach, and follow up.				
Communicate(d) expectations to all stakeholders: provide(d) hooks to motivate participants to attend and transfer knowledge.				
Explain(d) the benefit of PD, who is it going to benefit, culturally relevant content, and make sure the PD meets the participant's needs and organization's needs.				
Identify (ied) which employees will attend the PD?				

For more information, tools, and resources visit mmltonline.com Copyright © 2019 | All Rights Reserved