



Culture impacts learning — and not just for students

BY CORINNE BRION

The events of 2020 highlighted many longstanding truths about teaching and learning, truths that can help us move toward a more just and equitable future if we act on them.

One such truth is that culture matters for learning, especially for

transfer of learning from abstract knowledge into practical application. Because this holds for adults' learning as well as students', it can and should have an impact on professional learning. Learning leaders should consider culture in their planning, implementation, and follow-up with educators.

Making professional learning more culturally relevant could help ensure effectiveness and decrease the trend of school systems spending money on professional learning that yields few results (Hess, 2013). In turn, this would contribute to better academic, social, and emotional outcomes for all educators and students, regardless of

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race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, language, abilities, and cultural backgrounds.

Culture plays a central role in everyone's personal and professional lives, but it can be more or less visible to us based on our experiences and cultural location. As a native of France who resides and works in the United States, and as a second language learner and speaker, I find the impact of culture on learning and teaching to be highly salient, and it is an area of great interest to me.

I know what it's like to experience cultural mismatch. When I was principal of a new charter school in Oregon, I heard people ask, "What is she doing here, when she is not even from here?" It became very clear that to relate to and learn from one another, my stakeholders and I needed to better understand each other's cultures.

Based on my experiences as a former pre-K-12 teacher and administrator and a professional learning leader, I aim to bring a culturally responsive lens to other educators through professional learning. My work has taken me to many diverse places in Europe, the U.S., and Africa. In each place, I have learned important lessons about the impact of culture on educators' learning and transfer of learning into practice.

Many of those lessons were learned during six years of working in five African countries to strengthen the capacity of school leaders in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Liberia, Rwanda,

and Ethiopia. My colleagues and I conducted professional learning events, trained local trainers, and conducted extensive longitudinal research projects (Brion, 2020, 2018; Brion & Cordeiro, 2020) in Burkina Faso and Ghana. We examined whether and how school leaders in those two countries implemented newly acquired knowledge after engaging in professional learning.

These various experiences across cultures resulted in the development of a research-based and culturally grounded framework that I refer to as the multidimensional model of learning transfer. The model aims to help leaders and professional learning organizers plan, deliver, and assess their professional learning to assist teachers as they implement new knowledge. Another goal is to improve student learning outcomes and well-being while also supporting a better return on schools' investments.

The model can be applied across cultures and contexts. If you are thinking the model does not apply to you because it is based largely on my experiences in Africa, I invite you to continue reading because the lessons related to learning transfer are applicable to all districts and schools.

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN LEARNING TRANSFER

Lindsey et al. (2018) define culture as "everything you believe and everything you do that enables you to identify with people who are like you

and that distinguishes you from people who differ from you" (p. 29). Culture is therefore pervasive in how we interact, how we learn, and whether we transfer, or apply, what we learn.

Learning is a social endeavor and knowledge is contextual. Culture affects learning transfer specifically because if cultural barriers prevent people from engaging in various aspects of the learning process, they will not be able to apply new knowledge to their jobs (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Closson, 2013; Sarkar-Barney, 2004; Silver, 2000; Yang et al., 2009).

For example, if the content and materials of the learning experience are not culturally relevant, or if a participant does not see her culture reflected in the facilitators and other participants, the learning experience will be less likely to lead to changes in practice (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013).

In my research in Africa, I have observed many examples of ways that culture affects learning transfer from professional learning. What follows are some of these examples.

THE NOTION OF TIME

In all five countries, the notion of time was lived differently. In Burkina Faso and Liberia, participants arrived one hour early to the professional learning, and the event started on time, whereas in Rwanda and Ethiopia, participants were slightly late. In Ghana, it was common for the professional learning to start two to three hours after the scheduled time.

Locals once shared: “You Americans have nice watches, but we have the time.”

As facilitators from the West, we often wondered if the tardiness was due to the heavy traffic or the fact that we were working with school leaders who may have gone to their schools before the start of the professional learning. But local colleagues advised us to start on time, explaining that as participants began to see the value in the professional learning, they would come on time. When we followed this advice, we were respecting their cultural norms and values about earning trust and respect.

In Burkina Faso and Rwanda, we found that people tended to avoid uncertainty. As a result, it was important for them to know in advance — and in writing — what would happen on an hour-by-hour basis during the professional learning, how it would be led, and who would lead it. Once we understood these cultural traits and prepared accordingly, participant attendance increased.

Understanding the notion of time has especially important repercussions for the planning phase of professional learning because, during this phase, organizers communicate expectations and norms to facilitators and learners, explain who will benefit from training, state that participants are accountable to implement new knowledge, and share the schedule.

FORMALITIES MATTER

Citizens of Burkina Faso and Ghana greatly value traditions. Burkina Faso, however, is more formal than Ghana when it comes to professional learning. For example, it is not unusual for Burkinabe to have an opening and closing ceremony for professional learning, with media, speeches, and special addresses conducted with formal language and formal traditional attire.

As a facilitator, it was important for me to understand and respect these customs, and that helped me to form a bond with my audience. As

an organizer, I learned to schedule accordingly, prepare the room adequately for the festivities, and include it in the invitation sent to the participants before the professional learning.

As another example, professional learning participants in many of these countries highly valued receiving a certificate of completion. The certificate has a symbolic value to the leaders and may also provide them with a certain status. As I visited schools, I saw the certificates posted and framed in leaders’ offices just as some of my Western colleagues post their university degrees in their university offices. Knowing this enabled the team to include these items in the program and professional learning formal invitations.

WHO IS THE KNOWER?

In leading professional learning, it is important to understand notions of who holds knowledge and power. Power differentials can negatively impact the collaborative spirit that many professional learning leaders strive for.

For example, in West Africa, I found that participants were deferential to those of us who are white, especially when formal or academic titles were added to the whiteness. I and other facilitators coming from the West had to be aware of these power dynamics and work to change them. When I facilitated professional learning sessions, I constantly focused on building trust among the participants and stated numerous times that they were the experts and that I was there to facilitate and was eager to learn from them.

I also asked for my colleagues and me to be given local names to avoid the distance created by having a Western name and title. Ghanaian participants baptized me “Asantewaa,” after a respected woman warrior who fought for what was the richest region of Ghana at the time, the Ashanti region. In Burkina, participants named me “Wendkuuni,” or God’s gift.

After these initial and unofficial

naming ceremonies, I began introducing myself with these names during subsequent professional learning events. This practice made participants at ease and helped them to see me as a colleague, not a know-it-all.

We also aimed to reduce the cultural and power differences by using relevant and contextually appropriate examples and stories that leaders in rural and urban areas could relate to. To achieve cultural relevancy, we visited the countries numerous times, interviewed school leaders about their needs, collaborated with local educators and university professors, and sought feedback from participants after professional learning to review the materials and make the necessary cultural modifications, such as switching words most commonly used, examples, or pictures.

COLLECTIVISM

My experience suggested that “we” takes precedence over individual needs in the five nations I studied. In honor of this cultural value (and consistent with best practices in professional learning), we emphasized collaboration, which was familiar because the participants did it all the time in their communities.

We also focused on student-centered activities. This was more of a novelty for participants because the standard approach to professional learning in these countries is stand-and-deliver, in which the facilitator lectures and participants listen. As a result, it was necessary to coach local facilitators throughout the stages of professional learning on how these approaches enhance transfer of learning.

Collectivist values also influenced professional learning in other ways. The emphasis on collectivism made participants very interested in forming communities of practice and staying connected to put into action what they had learned during the professional learning. In Ghana, where many people use WhatsApp in their personal and professional lives, we did a WhatsApp

follow-up intervention (Brion, 2018) to provide further opportunities for peer learning. In Ethiopia, participants used Viber to accomplish a similar community of practice.

Collectivism also raised some challenges. In West Africa, it seemed to hinder participants and local facilitators from reflecting on one's own learning and from giving feedback to others — key components of adult learning. The collectivistic culture seemed to have created a norm of making nice and maintaining politeness rather than offering criticism. I observed this numerous times in the debriefing sessions with local facilitators. The Westerners often had to ask for feedback on their teaching, and the response was usually the same: "It was good."

A MODEL FOR LEARNING

Based on learning experiences like these, I developed the multidimensional model of learning transfer to promote cultural awareness when planning, organizing, conducting, and evaluating professional learning. In this model, I propose that culture is the overarching factor that affects all other dimensions of learning transfer.

The multidimensional model of learning transfer is inspired by the seminal work of Broad and Newstrom (1992), who identified six key factors that promote or inhibit learning transfer, but it is unique in considering culture as the main enhancer or inhibitor to transfer.

In the multidimensional model of learning transfer, I define culture as individual, sectional, departmental, organizational, regional, and national cultures as well as cultures related to a continent. Culture also incorporates the differential effects of age, gender, race, ethnicity, social class, religion, sexual orientation, and abilities, among others.

Culture affects all stages of the professional learning and learning transfer processes, including two stages that were not included in previous models such as Broad and Newstrom's and that convey the importance of

making professional learning ongoing and sustained: pretraining and follow-up.

Pretraining includes the preparation and orientation of facilitators and other key stakeholders so that they can support the professional learning once it has begun, and follow-up includes structures for ongoing application such as coaching and professional learning communities to create a culture where learning and its application is valued.

Culture also affects all aspects of professional learning, including content, materials, and context in which the learning and larger work of teaching occur, and all stakeholders including learners and facilitators.

By considering how culture pushes on each of these stakeholders, elements, and stages, leaders can come to understand the role culture plays in our learning and integrate cultural awareness as they organize, implement, and evaluate their professional learning while also enhancing learning transfer.

A lack of such awareness presents numerous risks, including reinforcing stereotypes, increasing intolerance among groups, raising potential misunderstandings, escalating frustrations and defensiveness, and causing learners and facilitators to withdraw (Williams & Green, 1994).

The multidimensional model of learning transfer — and cultural proficiency more generally — can be useful for all schools and districts, especially but not exclusively those that serve a diverse student and staff population. As leaders, we should all understand our own culture and identities, as well as those of our staff, students, and communities, to ensure that learning occurs and transfers into practice.

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