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Changing the Learning Strategy: Informal Methods for Enhancing a Learning System

August 2018

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MAKING THE ACCIDENTAL PURPOSEFUL

- Informal learning is discretionary and occurs outside of formal training environments

  - Different types of informal learning vary in intentionality and consciousness (e.g., may happen without awareness)

  - Seen as an extension to formal learning and as the ability to practice in the real world

- 70-80% of all learning in organizations is informal

  - Must capitalize on this opportunity and ensure that these experiences are meaningful!

    - Informal, just like formal learning experiences, should focus on "the right" skills (e.g., skills employees are weak at)

  - Need methods to capture and make sense of associated data

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- Two broad classes of antecedents
  - Personal variables (personality traits; demographic variables)
  - Situational variables (resources; support; opportunities)

- Stronger support for the impact of situational variables (Cerasoli et al., 2018)
  - Support variables (e.g., formal organizational policies; mentorship) hold particularly strong relationships with informal learning

- Focal learning methods
  - Social Learning
  - Developmental Work Experiences

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- Importance: All people learn continuously just by watching and observing

- Relevant Past Work/Research
  - Bandura (1961): Children who observed aggressive behavior are more likely to demonstrate those same behaviors
  - Langkamer (2008): Subordinates whose leaders engage in self-directed learning are more likely to do the same
  - Flanagan et al. (2015): Soldiers in initial officer training mimic the social skill behaviors exhibited by their instructors

- Stealth Training: teaching an unrelated curriculum (e.g., leadership) while simultaneously developing other skills (e.g., marksmanship)
- Data collected on instructors and students in an Army initial leadership course
  - Some instructors were trained to interact with students in a manner that promoted good social interactions
  - During training events, students participated in a challenging role play negotiation session (mock Key Leader Engagement; KLE)
  - During the KLEs, students whose instructors engaged in Stealth Training techniques were more likely to mimic the positive social interaction behaviors (e.g., demonstrating respect) they saw in their instructors
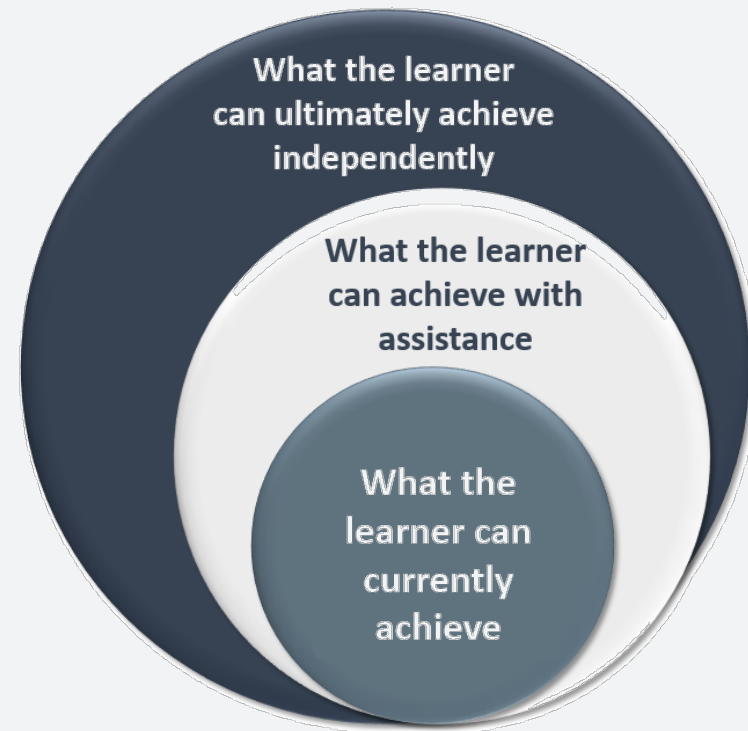
**IBOLC Student Pre- vs Post-Training comparisons**

Significance at $p < .05$

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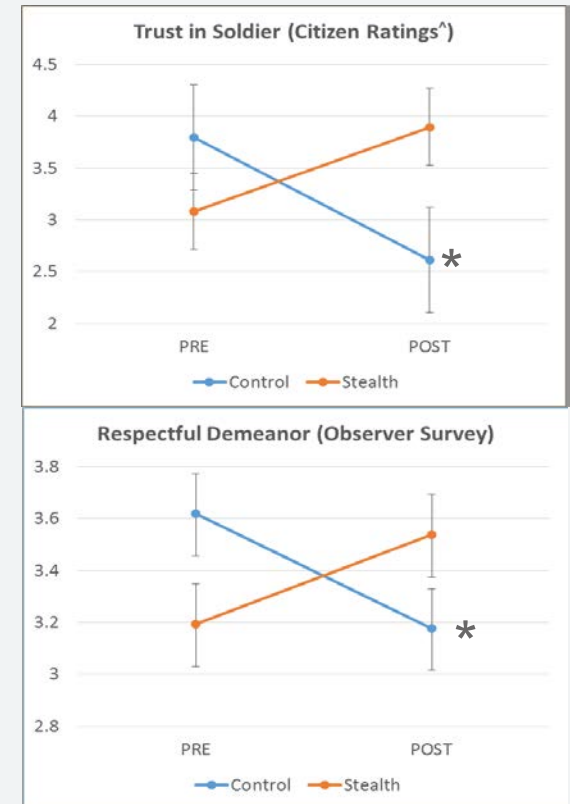
- Implication: Leaders can be trained to *strategically* exhibit behaviors that contribute to employees learning across multiple domains
  - Leaders need to also strategically place subordinates in situations where they can observe good behaviors that they learn to emulate
- Challenges
  - Identifying quantifiable data streams (e.g., What activities should be measured? How should we measure them?)
  - Assessing learning and growth
  - Must consider the "dark side" of social learning
    - Makes it even more important that leaders are trained to be strategic in their interactions

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- Importance: Work experiences – intentional or not – have the ability to challenge individuals
- Relevant Past Work/Research
  - Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD: Vygotsky, 1978)
    - Work experiences/training must be just challenging enough to promote learning
  - Deliberate Practice (Ericsson et al., 1993)
    - Gain exposure to and practice skills at which you are deficient
    - Expertise is a function of the amount of deliberate practice combined with feedback

What the learner can ultimately achieve independently

What the learner can achieve with assistance

What the learner can currently achieve

- Use case: Nurse triage skills
- Focus on "organic" deliberate practice that occurs on the job
    - Do nurses who engage in triage cases where they are less experienced develop skills more quickly than nurses who do not?
- Potential training impact
    - If data illustrate that nurses who engage in more deliberate practice have greater rates of skill acquisition, case assignment should be less about schedule and availability and more about learning needs
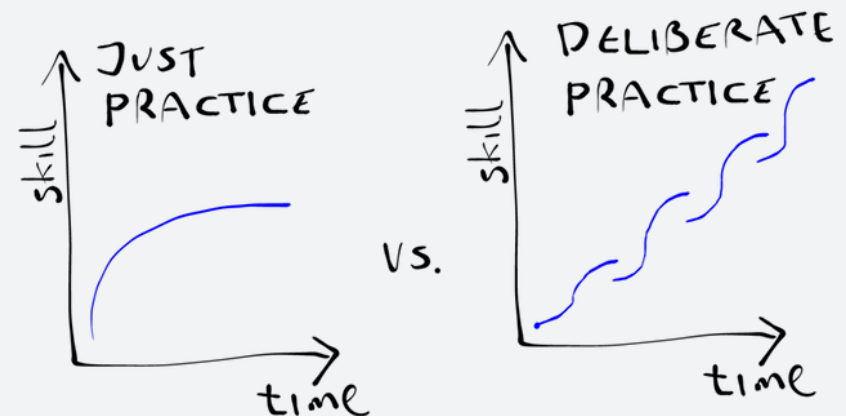
- Implication: Exposure to challenging/stretch work experiences can and should be made more deliberate
- Challenges
  - Must have a "map" that links skill needs/learning objectives to specific work experiences
    - This map must account for future career goals and push individuals to the edge of the ZPD
  - Measurement and assessment
    - How are data collected and used to inform growth assessments?

Summary and Recommendations

- Informal learning can enhance and supplement formal learning

- Measurement of informal learning is key
  - Sensors are ubiquitous but what data will tell us if and how learning is occurring?
  - Measurement must also be theoretically meaningful

- Once we can measure and make valid assessments, we must ensure that *meaningful* informal learning continues to happen
  - Train organizations and leaders on how to capitalize on these events
  - Ensure that individuals have the skills needed to learn effectively in these environments (i.e., must learn how to learn)
  - Individual learning paths should include recommendations for both formal and informal learning

Final Considerations

- To create a total learning ecosystem, consider…
  - **Formal and informal learning experiences** when developing personalized training recommendations
  - **The learning environment** (What work design factors will help/hinder informal learning?)
  - **The learner** (How do personality and individual differences influence what informal learning experience will be most relevant and/or effective?)
  - **The learning experience** (Which type of informal learning experience is most appropriate/effective for training the specific skills of interest?)

Learning Environment

Learner

Learning Experience
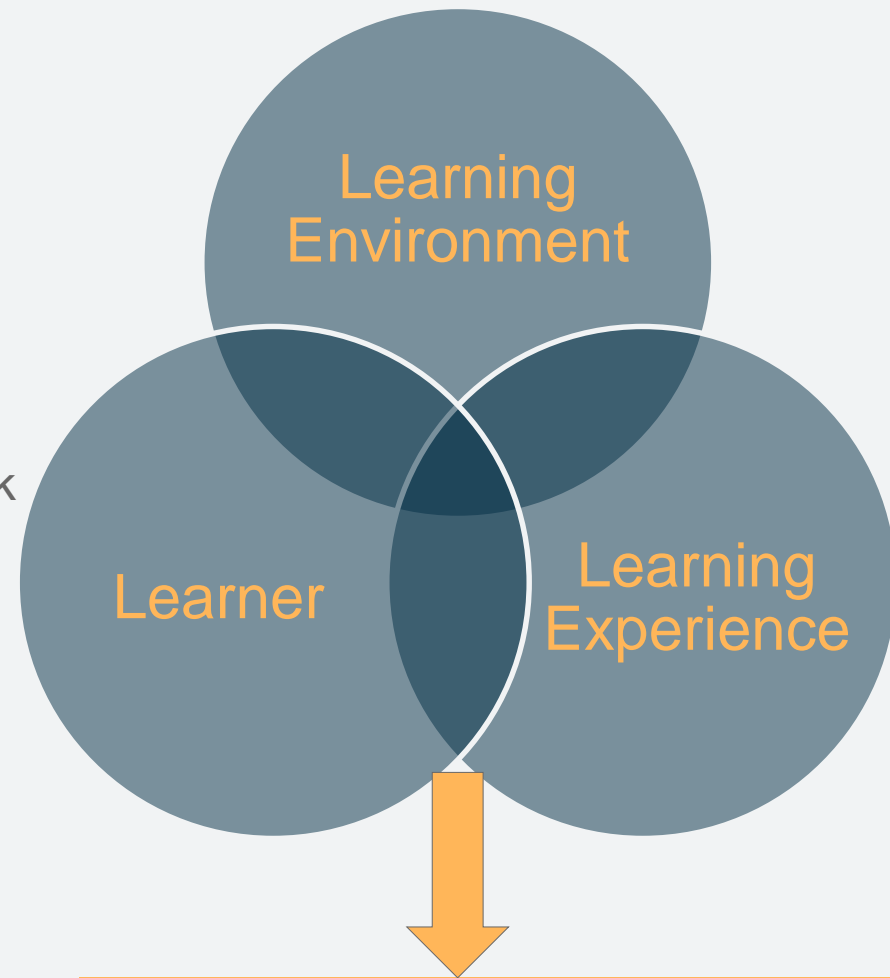
Learning Ecosystem that Leads to Long Term Growth and Development

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