

## **What Motivates Employees to Persist With Online Training? One Canadian Workplace Study**

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### **Abstract**

*There is a shortage of published research available on work-situated and work-related online training designed to help employees at the entry levels of their organization complete their day-to-day tasks more efficiently. One reason for this may be that the training processes that add value to and impact on an organization's profitability margins may not be available to the public in order to maintain a competitive advantage. The study reported here, which is situated in a reportedly successful training program, presents an opportunity to understand the online training factors from the perspectives of the entry-level employees and from the administration. These insights provide a window on the factors that contributed to a high participation and completion rate for an online training program at one organization's workplace. The findings may not be generalizable to all other online workplace learning programs, but provide helpful insights and factors to be considered when providing online workplace training to entry-level employees.*

**Key Words:** online training, workplace training, technology affordances, constraints, e-learning, adult learning, self-directed learning

### **Introduction**

Corporate workplaces seek the most effective ways to deliver training to their employees. Many companies have moved to an online version of training as it is generally considered to be more cost-effective, but in reality, not all training transitions to e-learning deliver economic advantages to companies (Strother, 2002). Studies of face-to-face vs. online courses have not shown significant achievement differences but there can be large differences in the outcomes of individual courses (Jaggers, 2011). Some online courses have been shown to have superior outcomes, particularly if they include additional learning materials and if the course has some hybrid elements.

Cost is not the only consideration, as there are also the human-computer interaction factors to be considered, including which of the components of an e-learning training method encourage employees to persist with training. Completion rates for online courses have historically been less than those for face-to-face (Giguère, 2007). Other human factors to be considered include: the convenience of the online training program; the consistency of the online training experience over time and among employees; and the provision for employees to re-take training modules at their own pace until they are successful. Many of these considerations cannot be fully captured through online survey mechanisms, but require a more in-depth investigation in order to understand the human factors which can impact the employee's online training experience.

The purpose of the research outlined in this study was to study one specific online training program to determine which aspects of the training contributed to its success.

All of the online training for this research study was undertaken by employees at one workplace location of a large national corporation. A key consideration for the location of this research study was that the identical training program had been utilized in other Canadian retail locations where its completion rates were reported to be moderate or minimal. Based on management reports at the workplace referenced in this study, the online training program had been in use “extensively” and the online training program had already been completed by a majority of the retail floor staff. Another factor investigated in this research was the possibility that location-specific factors contributed toward the success or failure of this online workplace training. Additional factors investigated were: employees’ perceptions of the online environment and the training program; the employees’ attitudes and beliefs about learning; the approach of the management team; and the interaction effects from the combinations of these factors.

In many online training programs, the employee-learner works through the materials independently, so little is currently known about the individual employee’s personal experience with online training. In addition, another area with negligible data is the online training experience of multiple workers, usually gathered through a focused study of their perceptions. Qualitative research that seeks the opinions and perceptions of the employees-in-training and managers can expand understandings of online training by indicating which elements of online training encourage trainees to persist with the training and which factors discourage or derail them.

This study follows the progress of employees through an online self-study program of over 200 courses in three areas: customer service; product information; and company policies and procedures. Each course consists of a series of content screens interspersed with tests every three to six screens. Some courses also have games or animations and all courses end with a final test. Most courses could be completed in 30-40 minutes. The course groupings aligned with departments in the store. A score of 80% or higher was required for the employee/learner or trainee in order to receive credit for the course. There was no penalty for retaking the final test in each course as many times as needed. Employees received certificates and awards when they completed a dozen core courses along with up to eighteen elective courses in one department.

The training program was seen as a solution to one of the store’s biggest challenges: a continuous staff turnover that required ongoing training on a continuous basis for many people who possessed varying skills and knowledge at the entry level. The program was also seen to help with other challenges such as a large inventory of products, ongoing new and discontinued products, day and evening work shifts to staff the store, large and diverse staff, and a continuous stream of customers who wanted to know about products and how similar products compared. An online, flexible training program was seen as one way to address many of these issues.

## **Review of the Literature**

Limited research has been published about workplace-related online training completion rates and the factors that contribute toward an employee’s persistence for completing this online training. The focus of research on the subject of online programs is more often directed toward advanced education, found at colleges and universities. As well, the focus of most training programs in corporate organizations is directed to the individuals in the professional or management areas, as reported by the Canadian Council of Learning (CCLI, 2009). Employers tend to invest in employee development in order to help employees progress to higher career levels. For example, in Canada in 2008, more than 66% of workers with university-level education degrees received formal job-related training, compared to 22% of workers with less than a high-school education (CCLI, p. 26). The focus of the study reported here is on the workers at the entry level of the organization.

Adult education and workplace training are prevalent in present times. According to Statistics Canada (StatsCan, 2009), adult education and training involve a significant sector of the population. For example, in Canada, 35 % of adults were involved in education and training programs over the past decade and most of this training was job-related (StatsCan, 2009). While Canada’s overall adult education participation rates were considered to be average, what was distinctive was the number of training hours that Canadian participants dedicated to each course, which was higher than other countries (StatsCan, 2009). Multiple factors have been found to positively influence participation in adult learning: higher levels of education, youth, being employed, working in a high-skill, white-collar job, and working for a large firm. The overall consideration for determining participation, however, is whether or not the adult feels that the training will be of personal and workplace benefit (StatsCan, 2009).

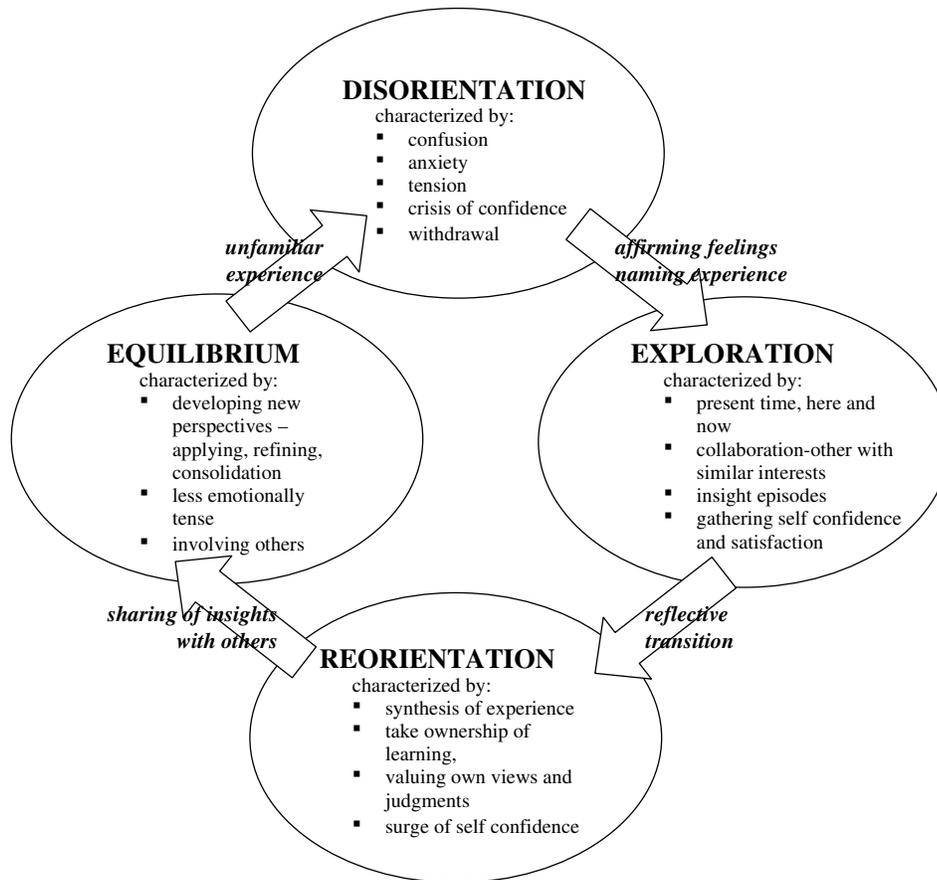
A recent Canadian policy statement on adult education in Canada finds that the influence of the global knowledge economy is being felt in adult education. Information is changing at a rapid rate and, as a result, most adult training is now taking place after the adults are already in the workforce (Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC), 2005). The CMEC report notes that there have been multiple recent changes in adult education and training including: 1) growth in the significance of adult education in life; 2) a trend toward specializations such as workplace training; 3) an increasing sophistication to the research on adult learning; and 4) the introduction of online learning in both formal and informal learning for adults (p.53).

According to the American Society for Training and Development (Bingham, 2012), a significant portion of workplace training (66%) is still instructor led, with 33% of the training offered online. The online course designs include: a mixture of online and remote instructor-led; self-paced via network; self-paced non-networked; and using non-computer technology (such as mobile devices). While the proportion of instructor-led training remains relatively unchanged since 2009 (Bingham, 2012), there is also a growing interest in using mobile devices for more immediate learning. This may or may not impact the future of other e-learning formats.

### **Adult learning theory**

There have been numerous theories of adult learning that have been proposed and several of them underpinned the research described here. Mezirow first introduced a theory of learning in 1978, and in later works (e.g., Mezirow, 1998), he describes a theory of adult learning known as transformative learning. This theory hypothesizes that adults learn from critically examining, questioning, validating and revising their experiences and their interpretations of them. This theory is also connected to earlier theories of constructivism which posit that learning is driven by the learner, and that learners actively create meaning out of their experiences. A person creates a world view as a result of his or her experiences. Mezirow suggests that when an individual's view of reality is in disharmony or when discord exists between one's perception and experience (a critically reflective assumption), then learning will occur. Learning is not transformative when it fits in with current values and frames of reference but when a sense of alienation occurs, (as in the critical self-reflection of an assumption) then "significant personal and social transformations can result from this reflection" (Mezirow, 1998, p.186).

Taylor (1987) built upon Mezirow's work and her research included a qualitative study of how adult learners become self-directed. She traced the transformation process or development of individual self-directedness, identifying common phases that all learners experienced in a self-directed course. In validating the learning phases she developed, she found that disharmony can occur in both the disorientation and exploration phases of the resulting model (Figure 1). She found that collaboration and "sharing the discovery" took place in two stages of the learning cycle. In his earlier work, Mezirow (1978) had described how this sense of alienation can lead a person to seek out others in similar situations. Taylor (1986) substantiated this and found also that adult learners prefer collaborative learning.

**Figure 1: Taylor's (1986) self-directed learning phases**

Building on this work, Cranton (1989) summarizes Mezirow's transformational learning as a 10-step adult learning process which includes:

1. A disorienting situation
2. Self-reflection
3. Significant evaluation and sense of disconnection
4. Connecting discomfort to others' experiences
5. Considering new ways of being
6. Accumulating experience in new ways of being
7. Developing a plan of action
8. Building knowledge to put plan in action
9. Trying out new ways of being
10. Re-assimilating into the culture

In summary, there are multiple theories of adult learning that help to build an understanding of how adult learning takes place. Usually, adult learners have already developed a schema for understanding the world before they undertake courses and training. In order for them to accommodate new learning into their world view, they need to actively seek to understand new concepts and reflect on how the new learning supports or disorients their current view. While little has been written about adult learning theory in the context of online learning for entry-level workers, the research study described here provides an opportunity to consider the theories of adult learning relative to the experience of the participants in the study.

## **Research on workplace learning**

Gunawardena, Linder-VanBerschoot, LaPointe, and Rao (2010) studied a multinational corporation to determine predictors of success in online learning by measuring learner satisfaction and transfer of learning. This study looked at an online program for engineers which had synchronous and asynchronous elements. While the adults in this case were experienced learners, the highest predictor of the transfer of learning was peer support. Gunawardena and colleagues also found that conflicting priorities between workplace demands/pressure and time spent on the training courses was a common issue. Berge (2007) found that conflict occurs in the workplace when work and learning collide. Berge's research found the priority in the workplace was to solve work issues including technical problems or staff shortages; training took a back seat. This is one of the disadvantages of having the employees undergo training at work, during working hours, especially for full-time staff. There can be conflicting priorities at the workplace between daily work and additional learning.

One aspect to consider about online courses is the trainee's technical readiness for online learning, which may or may not be related to an individual's computer skills in completing work-related tasks. The navigation of the online training program may or may not be reflective of the computer work environment. The orientation to online learning is important according to Gunawardena and colleagues (2010), who report that many learners in their study initially felt they did not need to attend a course orientation due to their familiarity with computers and Internet technologies. This lack of orientation resulted in a failure to complete the program.

A central finding of the study undertaken by Gunawardena and colleagues (2010) was that the highest predictor of learning satisfaction in courses was online self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1977) is the learner's belief that he/she has what it takes to be successful at a task. Evidence of online self-efficacy or the evidence of supports which build the learner's confidence in being able to learn in the online training setting have been shown to be important success factors. These findings were considered in the research design.

## **Methodology**

There are multiple factors to be considered when defining the success of an online training in a retail corporation. The number of training courses completed by each trainee and the number of trainees undertaking the online training are easily recorded but these data may not be the most helpful to the corporation's decision-making. For example, from a profitability perspective, the knowledge, skills or attitudes gained from training can benefit an organization in ways that have a positive impact on the company's bottom line. In a retail setting, some of the measurable indicators of business gains based on training would include total sales, number of transactions, size/value per transaction, and number of items per transaction. The challenge of measuring the gains from training in a workplace setting is that, in a live setting, it can be difficult to nearly impossible to isolate the impact of the training courses/program from all other influences on the workplace. Often results are more anecdotal or suspected, but not directly causal. The impact of a training program when it happens in real time may not be isolated from other changes within an organization or location. Training effectiveness is not always measured beyond capturing the initial reaction of the learners, and also measuring learning gained at the training. The present study was intended to follow the trainees through the entire training program.

This research was designed to answer two research questions: a) "What is the process followed by workers in an online workplace training course?" and b) "What are workers' perceptions of online training in a workplace training course?" Qualitative methodology was used including interviews and an ethnography which created the data for a case study. O'Reilly (2005) describes ethnography as "a macro approach to gain knowledge of the wider context of action, as well as maintaining a close eye on the various ways that social structures are taking effect within and through agents in the practice of daily life." (p.11) This methodology recognizes that human behavior is complex but it can be researched in methodical way. This case study took place at a workplace where a national, online, self-study training program had been reported to be successful. The goal of the research was to create a detailed description and understanding of workers' and managers' perceptions as the workers participated in job-related online training. The data for this study include: interviews and observations of the workplace trainees in the online program; interviews with the management team; and the personal observations of one researcher who completed a certificate in the training program. The questions for the interviews centered on the retail workers, the store culture, and practices of the workers as they worked on the online training program along with their regular work.

One interesting aspect of this study was the trainee group. The participants were in the lowest wage category in the organization (often part-time workers with a wide range of backgrounds and education, and generally considered low-skilled). The study took place in a retail location where staff turnover is continuous. The study's participants' worked in the retail space responding to customer inquiries, providing product information, and tidying and restocking the product display areas.

The study was conducted at a medium-sized, locally-owned, retail franchise store (over 38,000 square feet) in a region of Canada where both staff and customers are culturally and racially similar. The training program was developed by the company's head office and available to stores for a fixed monthly fee. The participants in the study were volunteers, first shortlisted by the HR manager to include a range of age, gender, experience and a mixture of whether they worked on training primarily at work or at home (See Table 1). Not all of the employees invited to the study participated but those who chose to participate also chose to remain until the conclusion of the data collection.

**Table 1: Demographics of the employees (online trainees) in the study**

Age	Gender	Store Experience (yrs)	Employee Type	Starting Computer Experience	Where completed most of courses?
<25	Female	0.5	F/T	some	Home
<25	Female	<0.5	F/T	some	Work
<25	Female	<0.5	P/T	little	Home
<25	Male	1.5	F/T	some	Work
25-50	Female	6	F/T	little	Work
25-50	Female	2	P/T	none	Home
25-50	Female	1.5	F/T	some	Home
25-50	Female	1	F/T	some	Work
25-50	Female	1	F/T	some	Work
25-50	Female	<0.5	P/T	little	Work
>50	Female	4	F/T	little	Home
>50	Male	1.5	P/T	little	Home

Although it was hoped that the study's participants would match the demographics of the store's retail staff, there was imperfect alignment (See Table 2).

**Table 2: Comparison of Store Employees vs. Study Participants**

Characteristic	Store	Study
Gender	65% women	80% women
Employee type	60% Part Time	66% Full time
Age/background	many high school students	no high school students

The research was conducted onsite – with a pilot study (N=3) followed by a main study (N=12). The study was conducted at a retail location while it was open for business. Interviews were held during the afternoon when there were fewer part-time employees and high school students. The interviews were recorded and transcribed before the next interview. Interviews were conducted also with the manager of human resources and the store manager. The data gathering process, which took place over a nine-week period, was guided by Spradley's (1979) model which was developed and refined in his studies of homeless people. Participants were interviewed three times: early in the training program when the employees were past the initial lessons; mid-way through their learning program; and on completion of a series of courses which was hoped would provide a more reflective view. The interview questions focused on the participants' perceptions of the online learning and problem-solving. There were 2-3 weeks between interviews with an observation period of 30-45 minutes between the first and last interview where the participant was observed while working on the online training. The observation focused on the learners' online activities such as logging in, using the password, and locating the correct course. In addition, the length of time spent per screen, hyperlink use, and completion of quizzes was observed and noted.

Every effort was made to compare the data from interviews, observations, field notes and artifacts. Multiple data sources allow for the triangulation of data, especially when studying online training (Hara and Kling, 2000). Ethnographic studies offer a unique perspective, focusing on discerning any patterns in the activities and actions of group (Cresswell, 2012). An in-depth understanding of learners' choices and what prompts them to take action can be difficult to discern. Examination of their choices and actions can be gathered through computer logs, video camera recordings of participant activities, or participants' surveys of their activities. In the research described here, participants were given a log to complete regarding time spent on the training program, although this was not a useful source of information as many of them did not fill it in.

The data analysis was guided by Wolcott's (1994) research in education settings. In this study, the analysis focused on the learners' descriptions, experiences and stories about the online training courses and related interactions and activities. Foster's (1969) anthropological approach also guided data analysis and the discussion of the findings from three perspectives: the target group (the participants in the training program); the innovating organization (the company which offered the training); and the interaction setting (online). The target group and the interaction setting were discussed most often by the participants.

Patterned regularities in the data were identified (Wolcott, 1994). Common words and phrases were coded as they emerged through multiple reviews of the data. These codes were grouped and distilled down to the key finding that are reported in the next section. There were some limitations to this study such as the small sample size, the single site, and the necessity to limit the study to those employees who worked in the afternoons. There was no interference or influence from the cooperating company at the worksite but rather the research was welcomed without restrictions on posting of findings or research outcomes.

## **Findings**

This case study explores the experiences of the adult learners as told through their own words. The findings have been organized under themes or patterns that emerged and were present in the majority of the data. Pseudonyms have been used in reporting the findings. The first two findings relate directly to the purpose for the training program. Overall, the training provided a flexible way to build the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the retail staff so that they could fulfill their roles. Their employment duties included: answering questions posed by customers about products; dealing with customers in a courteous manner; and following company procedures and policies. The second finding was that the trainees' knowledge and abilities grew as they completed more courses. One unanticipated finding related to the newly-acquired knowledge and abilities was that employees continued to refer to the online courses for details and procedures long after the formal completion of the courses.

### **Finding 1: improved ability to help others**

The training program had been designed to help employees acquire a more positive interaction with customers. The employees reported that the training program provided them with new retail learning, enabling them to be more helpful to customers, other staff, family, and friends. Ten out of the twelve learners related success stories about how their online learning had enabled them to help someone, whether on the phone or in person. Almost every trainee also had a personal story about how he or she had used what was learned online at home or with his or her family also. Here's a typical comment from one trainee Kim, "It's little things that you have to do that you wouldn't normally know how to do, and the courses, they give you the information to do it on your own." This sentiment was echoed by most of the others. Their comments addressed both product information courses where they learned about product details as well as the customer service courses where they learned how to ask questions to determine customer needs. For example, Joan said, "It's really helped me dealing with customers ... it's helped me explain things more clearly. I was really impressed with the amount of material that they [online courses] give you and all the tips they give you."

An interesting finding emerged from the female learners. Many of the women talked about taking courses in non-traditional areas, learning about products such as automotive parts or plumbing. The training program enabled them to work more effectively in these areas instead of having to wait to learn from a more experienced staff member, often a male staffer. The fact that the women who were working in non-traditional departments knew the products well surprised customers and gave the female staff an extra boost in confidence. This further encouraged the women to keep on learning from co-workers, additional courses and other "experts".

Completing courses in the training program also qualified the staff for job openings in other areas of their store or at other locations. The training program offered the employees more opportunity for advancement from their starting position.

### **Finding 2: the training program as a source of *just-in-time* information**

The learners talked about the information they learned and used, sometimes within hours of completing the courses. The structure offered them small chunks of information so they could build their knowledge of products, customer service, and company procedures gradually. The learners were emphatic about the value of the learning in the courses once they commenced the courses, but admitted to being skeptical initially.

The training program itself provided a multimodal learning situation. Some of the elements designed into the training program that the employees found helpful for their learning included pictures and photographs, diagrams, short videos, cartoons, audio, and games. These additional media forms helped some of them feel less alone (videos, cartoons), and helped some of them learn more easily (audio and text vs. text alone). In comparing the training program to another online course that they were required to take about workplace safety, the safety course was described as being “a bunch of slides with text on them and multiple choice questions at the end” which was not helpful for learning compared to the online training program for retail work.

Approximately half of the trainees talked about the benefit of being able to navigate forward or backwards as they needed to review or reread parts of the online courses. While this might seem to be an obvious feature of most self-study courses, they commented on this aspect. The trainees also found that it was helpful to be allowed to work at their own pace, without interruption. They appreciated not having the distractions of social interactions or individuals asking non-related questions, so that they could progress through the training at their own pace.

A more unexpected use of the training program was its application as a reference - an electronic information source to look up details when they needed. Eight out of the twelve participants used terms like “reference” or “look up” in describing how they used courses after they had completed them, since the training courses were available to them online. The training program became a sort of electronic product guide. As long as the store continued to subscribe to the training program, there was no expiry to the learners’ access such as the separation that often occurs in academic settings at end of term. In addition, since courses were updated periodically by head office, the training program served as a reliable source of information for the learners, requiring only the time to get to the computer and find the details that they needed.

In summary, the training program was intended to train the staff so they could better perform their job and, accordingly, it focused on the information they required to do so and the activities of their work. The next two findings were outside the anticipated goals of the online training program. While it was not an unexpected outcome from a learning success standpoint, the increased sense of self-worth that emerged for the trainees both surprised and pleased the store management. The second unanticipated finding was the employees’ appreciation for choice in the training even though the courses were required ones.

### **Finding 3: increased sense of self-worth**

A strong finding from analyzing the data in this research was that the participants felt an increased sense of self-worth from their progress in the online training program and their improved ability to do their jobs. Joe’s comment: “[I]t builds confidence, it build strength inside you” captures the trainee’s view. The trainees felt supported and encouraged by management and their co-workers and they, in turn, encouraged others. This positive impact on the learners was not a planned outcome of the training program. Learners expressed surprise and amazement at their success and recognition, especially those who had been out of school for over twenty years. Learners commented about feeling good about themselves upon receiving awards and feeling smarter after finishing courses.

Since this was the second year that the training program was in place, the more experienced learners talked about the momentum they experienced after taking a number of courses with comments such as, “Once you get your [first level] award, then you’re kind of like on your way...” This contrasted with views from the newest employees who had different issues. The newer trainees had not yet reached a point of momentum, and spoke about having trouble figuring out how to log in and complete the first courses.

There were also some indications that employee momentum could lag, especially over the summer when few were working on courses or when they were taking courses that they were not interested in, reflected in comments such as this: “For me getting motivated to go through the ones I don’t like is more difficult than putting up with the difficult ones. They reported that receiving encouragement from the HR manager and from co-workers was helpful. The HR manager reported that a few very enthusiastic individuals really talked up the training program in the lunchroom at breaks, and provided additional encouragement for learners.

In general, however, most of the learners talked about being pleased with their progress. They felt extra proud when they scored 100% on the end of course tests. One employee confessed to being a “knowledge junkie” whereas others found the training program was a simply a good way to learn more about how to do their job.

#### **Finding 4: sense of personal choice**

The trainees reported that having *choice in learning* was helpful, even though they were completing a required program. The trainees could choose to complete the training at one of two workstations in the store office or they could complete them at home. Taking the courses provided a change of pace for the retail staff and so it was reported to be a welcomed option. The majority of the store’s employees chose to complete the courses at work. Other choices included how much they completed at any one time – some would always complete a course or two at a sitting, while others used the clock to determine when they stopped. Between 30 minutes and an hour seemed to be the typical amount spent at any one time. The employees had a choice in which elective courses they took and could complete the training in whatever order they chose. Most started at the top of the list and worked their way down the courses.

The next two findings highlight the supports and barriers that impacted the trainees in their training progress and success. The management team had set expectations and did support the learners in a number of ways, but the trainees reported barriers. When combined, these two aspects provide a more complete picture of the dynamics and realities of the online training program at this work site.

#### **Finding 5: the role of the management in training**

The trainees reported that management had a key role in the success of the training program and that, specifically, the HR manager had taken a proactive approach in encouraging the staff to participate, which contributed to their success. As the *on-site champion*, she provided structure for learning. Based on the regular reports she received from the training program, the HR manager made intentional, regular follow-ups with the retail staff encouraging them individually, recognizing them publicly for their achievements, and ensuring that the computers were always working and available. Although she was not the trainees’ supervisor, they were comfortable with her monitoring their progress. The champion’s effectiveness seemed to be also related to the fact that she had access to the proper authority to get store policies aligned as needed in order to fit with the online training program.

The on-site champion reported that she discovered two critical times when intervention supported employee success in the online self-study training. Initially, trainees needed support to become comfortable navigating the online program and completing the first courses. The second intervention point was when the initial enthusiasm had waned - usually after the first few weeks. Running the regular reports from the training program at least weekly, and sometimes every couple of days, in her “on-site champion” role, she intentionally sought out employees and spoke to each one about his or her progress, sometimes to offer a compliment on progress, sometimes words of encouragement to keep going, and sometimes to remind and nudge individuals to get started. Thus, her role changed from coaching to support as trainees progressed through the program.

The on-site champion provided a structure for learning through a weekly consultation with the learners to schedule at least a single one- hour block of time that fit with their work time. This strategy was an initiative of the HR manager, and it helped to set the expectations for an employee’s weekly commitment to the training program. The learners viewed a request to spend an hour per week on training as a reasonable request. The manager talked about how having a weekly schedule for the worksite computers helped those who had trouble getting around to learning set a time to make a commitment. She made it clear that she expected each employee to work on a course and spoke with each one to schedule a suitable time for him or herself. This gave structure when there was no scheduled class time; scheduling time to work on an online course can be a challenge for less experienced learners.

Visible recognition of progress and achievement also worked for some trainees. A payment for each completed course was added to their pay and trainees indicated that this was welcomed. While it was a nominal fee, it still recognized the effort of each employee. The status of receiving a plaque for completion of all of the courses for a department (30 courses) was posted in the lunch room along with a certificate. One employee reported that she posted her certificate on her fridge at home along with those of her children. Employees were provided with pins to show completion of courses and trainees reported that they wore them on their uniform as evidence of their efforts.

### **Finding 6: concerns and barriers encountered in the online training program**

A number of barriers were reported by the trainees and these barriers presented themselves at different points on the trainee's timeline. First, the feeling of information overload was reported by the newer trainees, who also reported that these feelings of overload lessened as they progressed in the training and got closer to an award. This overload could have derailed their progress. According to the information supplied by several participants, this was one reason why the HR manager set up intentional interventions to help the trainees work past and through this feeling.

The second barrier was that trainees found courses or parts of courses to be annoying and/or boring. An example of an annoying aspect was the use of animation or an animated character in some of the courses. Other reported annoyances were the quizzes that were interspersed throughout a lesson, as the quizzes varied and did not have a consistent format. The learners found it hard to figure out what was expected or how to respond without a standardized quiz format. Another annoyance was the lack of synchronization between text and audio. These annoying elements were not enough to make the learner get totally frustrated and walk away from the online training course. The trainees responded either by turning off the audio or skipping over a portion of the course. Courses or sections where the trainees knew most of the content, but were still required to click through the course to get credit for it, were also considered boring. Participants also reported being bored with the topics in which they had no interest. The most common reaction to boredom was to skip or skim those parts or change to another course and work on something more interesting.

Another barrier that emerged was related to computer self-efficacy and the trainees' lack of confidence in their ability to learn on the computer. Several who had little computer experience (See Table 1) and were unfamiliar with online learning, expressed fear of damaging the computer or losing their way. This fear was more common with the newest employees, who found the training program to be another new aspect of their work. This overload also included: the duties of their job; finding their way around; new products and services; as well as new processes and procedures. The three most recent hires in the study (less than 6 months on the job) talked of feeling scared, nervous, and excited about starting the online training. For some of the learners in this study, this training experience brought back very negative school experiences. Others, however, were pleasantly surprised or challenged with the new dynamics – they liked the aspect of having the independence to work on the training course with no instructor and no other students.

In summary, although there were barriers identified, there were also supports in place to minimize their impact on the learning progress of the employees. Unacknowledged, however, these barriers could have derailed the progress of the online trainees.

### **Finding 7: policy-related findings**

This study took place in a retail organization which included an established hierarchy where the retail staff report to a department supervisor who reports to the retail manager. The entire staff also report to the store manager. The trainees' progress was monitored by the HR department, rather than their direct supervisor. Since the store was paying for each course that was completed outside of working time, the store management wanted to have some assurance that the company was getting value from their investment. The HR manager received regular reports from the training program identifying who had been working on courses, which courses had been completed or incomplete, and which employees had not yet taken any courses.

When the training program was first offered, employees were strongly encouraged to take the training program, although it was voluntary. After the manager saw the positive impact (he described it as a noticeable increase in profitability of the store), the training program became mandatory for all retail employees.

As evidenced by the interview comments, the employee-trainees did not have a strong resistance to this change but some hinted that others might be resistant. The employees interviewed agreed that the training program did build up their knowledge about products and customer service very quickly, although one person commented that some other workers found the training to be a waste of time or that it felt as if they were back in school.

The employees talked about the monitoring of the training program in their responses. Although these findings were mentioned by a smaller group of trainees, this supporting evidence provides a window into their views of the policy issues. The first area was the informal policy surrounding the training program itself. Trainees reported that they learned more about the expectations of the program, and what was acceptable and unacceptable, either from an initial conversation with the HR manager or from the HR staff as they worked on the first few courses or from their co-workers. There did not appear to be a formal written copy of *the rules*. Rather, it started with a conversation and with what they were told by others. The training program was an open book format, as any notes taken during the course could be used when completing the final quiz for the module. The HR manager did monitor how much time each trainee spent on each course. The manager was on alert for quick finishes; where the trainee could have just clicked through the screens or taken the test a number of times in a row to get the right answer.

In the interviews with the trainees, most indicated that they did not feel there were any guidelines surrounding program completion. They did indicate that they would be credited with a course, and paid for it, if they worked through each course and achieved an 80% plus score on the final test. Nearly every trainee indicated that just clicking through the course screens and taking the test without reading the content would be cheating. Cheating extended to taking the test without reading the content or taking the test multiple times without going back to review the material related to the incorrect questions – just guessing.

Employees reported also their coping methods for courses that were complex or in new areas. They reported taking more notes, going more slowly, going over the training module several times before taking the test, and redoing sections of the modules. This contrasted with the speedy completion of courses with familiar content, which one learner described as “flying through the course.”

In summary, the findings show that the online, self-study training program met its intended goals and there were also unanticipated benefits from the training. The management team took steps to improve the participation and completion rates at their workplace. Success encouraged more success, as employees were pleased with their improved customer service. They persisted in the training, supported by the on-site champion, and the collective encouragement of co-workers.

## **Discussion**

Three perspectives are considered in the discussion of this paper: views of the trainees; aspects of organization and policy; and the layer of the training that can be attributed to the online learning environment. These three perspectives align with Foster’s (1969) approach to applied anthropology where lessons learned in practice are used to clarify theoretical constructs and provide new insights.

The retail employees’ accounts of their online training experience aligned in multiple ways with the contributions of Mezirow and Taylor, and with Taylor’s (1986) cycle of orientation. This alignment was evident in the reported data of the employees’ progress through the online self-study training program. The disorientation time seemed to be a critical period for the learners. At this point in time, they profited from a supportive intervention, which became a key point in ensuring persistence to complete the training program. Potentially, at this point, the adult learners could have become discouraged and may have stopped participating if working solely on their own. The learners revealed that they would not all have continued in the training program without the external support and encouragement of the management team.

This study also provided insights into human-computer interactions. Personal choices in learning emerged as one of the aspects that contributed to the adult learners’ success, as did the surge of self-confidence felt as they completed training courses and reached milestones for each department’s course of study. As the employees used what they learned and integrated it into their knowing and doing, they became more comfortable and confident. This seemed especially important for many in the study who had limited education or negative memories of high school.

They seemed surprised and positive about having training so that they could improve how they fulfill their role at work. This may be an unexpected benefit from providing training and supporting success in less-experienced adult learners, those who are less accustomed to self-directed learning situations; and/or those who have vivid memories of the more traditional teacher-directed learning from previous schooling.

There was also knowledge to be gained from examining the perspective of the innovating organization, the company sponsoring the training. The management team identified key points in the training program and developed interventions which connected at strategic points in the self-study program. The on-site champion provided individual encouragement to help the learners successfully negotiate the hurdles of getting started (Gunawardena et al, 2010) and persisted after the initial adrenaline wore off and when the learners' online self-efficacy was still fragile. The use of a training schedule was not a perfect solution, although it helped the employee learners to make time for training even when they had to miss due to work and learning conflicts. The rewards and recognition program for the employees complemented the personal touch of management team. By taking proactive steps to ensure training persistence and course completions, the organization benefited in two key ways: the employees developed their employment and retail skills; and the store profits increased. The employees also benefitted through increased confidence in customer interactions and improved future employment opportunities. These findings point to the importance of management encouragement to employees to persist with the online self-study and also to the importance of management's recognition of a successful course completion.

Finally, consideration of the online training environment itself in this study provides some fresh insights into online training affordances and constraints. Computer-based training is a flexible but also seemingly impersonal way of learning where the adult learner works independently through a series of training courses without an instructor and peers. In the retail setting studied here, the online training program afforded the flexibility needed to train at a worksite where staff turnover was high; shift work was a reality; and the changing inventory of new or discontinued products was constant. Although there was an initial constraint in that it seemed to take the learners some time to get used to navigating the online program, it did provide a just-in-time means of remaining current with respect to the company. Employees noted multiple other affordances such as: the ability to review and re-take the program at an individual pace; the ability to work at home or at the company; and the ability to direct their own learning through choice and pacing. Another affordance was the ability to access the program as a reference site; it provided real-time information on the products and services they offered as well as the company's preferred ways to deal with customers, procedures, and policies. In addition, one of the affordances of this online program was that it provided a much-needed vehicle for training an often overlooked employee group that works part-time and has a significant, ongoing turnover rate. Whether or not the program would have been successful if the company had not made the training mandatory will never be known. Nonetheless, this study has provided some insights on the affordances and constraints of an online training program for adults, as reported by both the administration and the employees, and contributes in a small way to the field of understanding adult learning and e-learning.

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