

Management Development, Making it All Worthwhile: Introducing a Tripartite System of Transfer Grounded in the Relationships Inherent in an Apprenticeship Model of Delivery

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Abstract

This study investigates the link between the tripartite actors (learner, employer and training provider) involved in an apprenticeship – and the known variables identified in successful transfer of training. A new systems-based model of transfer is proposed which integrates the pre training environment, learning phase, and post training environment with the tripartite actors inherent in an apprenticeship. The model was applied to a L5 management apprenticeship delivered to an open cohort. This is a qualitative explorative study which applied thematic analysis to reflective reports completed by learners during the apprenticeship. Six themes have been identified which demonstrate how the apprenticeship generates a holistic transfer climate. The tripartite actors and known transfer variables interact at multiple stages in this system to multiply the effect of each, leading to positive transfer. The study contributes to the literature by refocusing researchers' attention on the systems approach to transfer whilst also adding to the slow but growing knowledge supporting the impact of apprenticeships on management learning.

Keywords

Apprenticeships • Transfer of training • Work-integrated learning

Introduction

Improving the ways in which skills are developed and applied is at the heart of addressing the UK's comparatively low levels of productivity. Better leadership and management capabilities, and better people management practices, are a pre-requisite if this is to be accomplished (CIPD, 2023, ONS, 2021), since a substantial body of evidence, drawn from global research spanning various industries, underscores the pivotal role of management practices in shaping organizational performance (Sadun et al., 2021). HRD scholars and practitioners are committed to learning and helping people and organizations to improve their performance (Han & Stieha, 2020). The role of HRD practice and research is therefore a vital consideration when looking for improvement in leadership and management capabilities. In both the public and private sectors, leadership development is seen as strategically important, with substantial amounts of money being invested (Knudson, 2022). Although organizations as a whole reserve one third of training for activities relating to supervisory or management skills, there is limited evidence

concerning the effectiveness of such activities (Brown et al., 2016; Edmonstone et al., 2019; Soderhjelm et al., 2021).

In the UK, programmes such as the Business Basics Programme (UK Government, 2018) and the Help to Grow Management initiative (Department for Business and Trade, 2023) provided access to funding, training, mentoring, and peer networks to foster improvements in leadership and management practices within SMEs. In larger public and private sector organizations, Management Development Programmes (MDPs) are typically designed and delivered internally by dedicated training and development teams (Knudson, 2022). However, organizations may also consider externally provided MDP options, such as those offered by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). These can range from short executive education courses to more comprehensive qualifications like Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes. While MBA programmes remain a popular choice due to their breadth and academic prestige, they are not without criticism. Some scholars argue that

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traditional MBA curricula can lack practical relevance and may underemphasize the development of essential management and leadership capabilities (Amblee et al., 2023). There are signs that MBA programmes are moving towards an enriched and more purposeful curriculum (Stoten, 2018), but it remains the case that their cost, typically ranging from approximately £37,500 for standard full-time courses to as much as £115,000 for longer or executive formats, means they do not offer an affordable organization-level solution to management and leadership development (Nathan, 2024).

In the UK, higher apprenticeships offer an alternative approach to building management and leadership competencies. The launch of the apprenticeship levy in 2017 meant that those organizations who pay into it, can retrieve funds to sponsor employees to complete a recognized apprenticeship. National data indicates that management and leadership higher apprenticeships such as the Senior Leader Apprenticeship and Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship are amongst the top five apprenticeship standards, attracting approximately half a million and quarter of a million new starts in 2021/22 and 2022/23 respectively (UK Government, 2024). In response to the introduction of higher apprenticeships, HEIs in the UK have diversified their portfolios, moving into the delivery of vocational education and training (VET) whilst continuing to offer the conventional academic undergraduate and post graduate programmes that constitute their core activity. There are now over 120 universities in England on the register of apprenticeship training providers (Department for Education, 2025).

For management development in any form to be effective, though, 'transfer of training' - defined as "the extent to which, what is learned in training is applied on the job and enhances job related performance" (Laker & Powell, 2011, p. 1) - must take place. Interest in transfer of training increased in the 1980s (Bell et al., 2017) and heralded one of the first major reviews, by Baldwin and Ford (1988). Since then, trainee characteristics, training design and workplace environment have been identified as mediators with Hart et al. (2019) suggesting all three must function collaboratively for transfer of training to be successful. Holton et al. (2000) refer to this holistic perspective as a transfer system and stress the need to understand the transfer climate (Holton et al., 1997). Their Learning Transfer System Inventory (LTSI), which contains sixteen factors, eleven of which are specific to the training taking place and five which are general to any training, being a way to do so. Unfortunately, transfer of training is still most often studied with a focus on one of the mediators (trainee characteristics, design, or workplace environment) alone. Studying mediators independently may overlook the relationship between them.

Transfer of training research has slowly begun to focus on apprenticeships. Suhaimy et al. (2023) notably found the identified mediators were all influential in apprenticeship

programmes in Brunei, thus bringing the focus back to the system rather than individual variables. Questions remain unanswered though about *how* they do this. We therefore feel it is important to address this gap in our knowledge of how apprenticeships are successful in stimulating transfer.

We argue that the clearly defined tripartite relationship among learners, employers, and training providers could play a pivotal role in facilitating learning transfer within apprenticeship programmes. This structure could enable each stakeholder to contribute independently and collectively to the process of transfer through the framework of work-integrated learning.

The purpose of this paper therefore is to investigate this tripartite relationship by combining a systems approach with the principles of work integrated learning. We aim to synthesize the known variables from the transfer of training literature with the tripartite relationships inherent in an apprenticeship and the principles of work integrated learning to create a holistic model of transfer. In so doing we address the identified knowledge gap by asking the following research question:

R1: What specific factors within the tripartite relationship (learner, employer, and training provider) are most influential in promoting effective transfer of training in management apprenticeships?

This study offers two significant contributions to the existing literature. First, it engages directly with the ongoing discourse concerning the lack of empirical evidence relating to the effectiveness of management development interventions (Brown et al., 2016; Edmonstone et al., 2019; Soderhjelm et al., 2021). Second, it draws attention to the role of management apprenticeships in staff and organizational development, an area that is emerging but remains underexplored in current research. By analysing the transfer of managerial competencies and behaviours through the conceptual framework of the tripartite relationship, the paper encourages us to identify the interrelated links between organizational actors moving beyond examination of their individual impact alone.

The focus is a UK specific apprenticeship programme, but the paper nonetheless has international significance since similar VET programmes operate in countries around the world such as America, Australia, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and numerous European countries. A comprehensive overview of VET in these countries is given by Wilson (2012). Management development is also a global concern with Ghana (Oppong, 2017), China (Branine, 2005), South Africa (Robertson et al., 2021), and Poland (Majczyk, 2022) representing some of the diverse contexts that have been examined. The findings of this paper will therefore have a global reach and resonate with any organisation looking to develop its managerial capability through VET.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, it highlights some prominent debates about apprenticeships and work-integrated learning pedagogies. This is followed by a review of literature on transfer of training to highlight the known variables. We then link these variables to the tripartite relationship of an apprenticeship to develop a theoretical concept which starts to look at how this relationship can encourage transfer. The methodology section explains the research design, study participants, data collection, and data analysis. The findings and discussion will consider the initial impact of the tripartite system of transfer before identifying practical implications and a future research agenda.

Theoretical Framework

Work Integrated Learning

Apprenticeships combine practical training in a job with study (National Apprenticeships Service, 2019). Government sponsored apprenticeship programmes were introduced in the UK in the early 1990s with the launch of Modern Apprenticeships offering competence-based National Vocational Qualifications at level 3. In 2013, following two influential reviews (Richard, 2012; Wilson, 2012), apprenticeships were extended to levels 6 and 7, enabling HEIs to work with employers and deliver vocational courses for non-traditional learners (Anderson et al., 2012; Quew-Jones, 2023).

HEI involvement in apprenticeship delivery has raised questions about the underpinning pedagogy of higher apprenticeships (Horackova, 2024; Quew-Jones, 2023). Key to this debate is how to integrate workplace 'on-the-job' learning with formal 'off-the-job' university delivered education (Konstantinou & Miller, 2021). Bridging the gap between these learning environments brings benefits for students' confidence, employability, social skills, and academic performance (Young, 2018). Bound et al. (2018) have challenged the traditional separation of theory and practice, arguing that a relational approach, which sees learning as occurring across interconnected sites, is a more effective way to understand the relationship between workplace and educational learning. The metaphor of a bridge between these two learning environments is reinterpreted as a series of relational crossings, with an emphasis on helping students recognize the connections between different learning sites (Konstantinou and Miller, 2021).

Establishing 'relational crossing points' between university-based and workplace learning is central to facilitating effective work-integrated learning. Both universities and employers play important roles in creating these connections. Some scholars have emphasized the responsibilities of employers and the conditions that support rich learning experiences, for example, Fuller and Unwin's (2003) Expansive–Restrictive Framework

highlights how workplace environments shape learning opportunities. Others argue that distinctive pedagogical principles, or signature pedagogies, should underpin programme design and delivery (Bravenboer & Workman, 2016; Costley & Dikerdem, 2011; Kettle, 2013; Lester & Costley, 2010; Lillis & Bravenboer, 2020; Lucas, 2010). These principles include the use of valid and appropriate assessment methods, quality assurance systems that accommodate individualized learning, and meaningful collaboration with employers. Case studies have been used to illustrate how such principles can be embedded in teaching, learning, and assessment strategies (Konstantinou & Miller, 2021; Quew-Jones, 2023). For example, Konstantinou and Miller (2021) draw on their institution's practice to show how problem-based learning and structured reflection can support work-integrated learning. Similarly, Jones and Brook (2019) highlight how action learning frameworks in provider-led meetings can promote deeper reflection, while Rhodes and Brook (2021) explore the value of reflective journaling in supporting student development. Research therefore indicates that a tripartite system underpins work integrated learning, especially where a HEI is involved. The HEI will provide knowledge, often in a formal off-the-job manner and learners must understand and retain this knowledge which helps build the relational crossing between two environments. The workplace must then support this crossing by helping the learner put the knowledge into practice. Parallels exist here with another established tripartite taxonomy relating to transfer of learning and training which will now be discussed.

Transfer of Training

Academics have attempted to address the transfer problem by concentrating on the input factors of trainee characteristics, training design, and workplace environment, considered to be a content approach (Gist et al., 1990). These pillars of transfer were established in one of the first major studies conducted by Baldwin and Ford in 1988 and have been developed ever since. With time, the focus on the input factors has been supplemented with a process approach which focuses more on how to maintain and generalize the learning in a post training environment (Gist et al., 1990). Both approaches will be reviewed in this section before providing a holistic framework to position the current knowledge base.

Input Factors

Continuous study has unearthed numerous trainee characteristics which mediate transfer such as motivation (Ali et al., 2022); locus of control (Cheng & Ho, 2001); personality, (Burke & Hutchins 2007); cognitive ability (Huang et al., 2015; Keith et al., 2010), perceived utility (Chiaburu & Lindsay 2008;

Chung et al., 2017; Grossman & Salas 2011); and self-efficacy (Na-Nan & Sanamthong, 2020; Weisweiler et al., 2013).

Training design initially concentrated on learning principles such as identical elements, teaching of general principles and stimulus variability (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). Newer concepts have been identified such as behaviour modelling (Murthy et al., 2008) and error management (Ran & Huang, 2019) which allow learners to observe and practise targeted behaviours (Grossman & Salas, 2011). Attention has also focused on the more practice led activities relating to training design. Martin (2010) focused on areas such as the timing of the training, whether the objectives are clearly communicated to and understood by the participants, whether the training is perceived as being useful, when feedback will be obtained, whether job demands have been adjusted to allow for training, and whether the location for the intervention is conducive to learning. This realistic training environment (Grossman & Salas, 2011) suggests the training environment should mirror the environment in which trained skills and competencies will be applied as closely as possible to the extent that on-the-job training might provide the most ideal environment.

Three sources of work support have been identified as organizational, supervisory, and peer (Hughes et al., 2020). Organizational support considers work system factors such as cues to prompt trainees and consequences for using training on-the-job, (Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Cheng & Ho, 2001; Martin, 2010) as well as providing opportunities to practise and apply new skills (Wei Tian et al., 2016). Line manager support is considered one of the most powerful tools for enhancing transfer (Burke & Hutchins 2007; Islam & Ahmed, 2018; Kim et al., 2019; Nijman et al., 2006). Managers can offer support through discussing what has been learned in training, offering recognition, participating in training themselves, providing encouragement and coaching, and modelling trained behaviours (Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Grossman & Salas, 2011; Lancaster et al., 2013). Peer support enhances transfer by improving employee's feelings of self-efficacy and providing them with coaching and feedback (Martin, 2010). Evidence also suggests that absence of support has a negative effect on employees and leaves them feeling frustrated (Clarke, 2002; Greenan, 2016).

Process Approach

The ever-evolving landscape has demonstrated that post training activity is also vital to support learners with transfer. Two dominant post training transfer interventions are relapse prevention and goal setting theory (Rahyuda et al., 2014). Relapse prevention (RP) was first considered as a post training transfer intervention by Robert Marx in 1982 (Burke & Baldwin, 1999; Gaudine & Saks, 2004). Marx identified seven steps to what has become known as the full or complete RP model - (1) set a skill maintenance goal, (2) operationally define a slip

and relapse, (3) explicate the advantages/disadvantages of applying new skills, (4) learn 14 specific transfer strategies (both cognitive and behavioural), (5) predict their first slip, (6) create coping skills, and (7) monitor their progress back on the job, (Burke & Baldwin, 1999). Researchers only using some of these seven steps are considered to use a modified RP model (Burke & Baldwin, 1999; Rahyuda et al., 2014). Despite interest in relapse prevention, there is a paucity of studies in the transfer literature (Burke, 1997; Gaudine & Saks, 2004), with goal setting theory receiving more attention.

The essence of goal setting theory is that people who set and commit to specific and difficult goals outperform those who set vague goals, abstract goals, or exhortation to do ones best (Brown et al., 2013; Latham & Locke, 2006). Studies (Brown, 2005; Brown & Warren 2014; Latham & Seijts, 1999; Weldon & Yun 2000) indicate that proximal plus distal goals lead to greater performance than distal goals alone. Mediators to goal achievement have been identified as viewing the goal as important, task complexity, situational constraints, participation in agreeing the goal, feedback, and commitment to the goal (Bipp & Kleingeld 2011; Ilies & Judge 2005; Li & Butler 2004; Locke & Latham 2006; London et al., 2004). Goal setting theory has tentatively been developed further to consider goal achievement using implementation intentions (Friedman & Ronen, 2015; Greenan, 2023; Greenan et al., 2017), further demonstrating the dynamic and evolving appetite for being able to identify the impact of learning and training.

This short narrative provides an overview of the progress made to date in studying transfer of training. It should, however, be noted here this is not a systematic literature review; it offers a heuristic perspective, which is visualized in Figure 1.

Generalization refers to the extent to which knowledge and skills acquired in a learning environment are applied to different settings in the workplace, whilst maintenance refers to the timescale in which transfer persists (Brown, 2005). Studies indicate a decline in skill use over time with variants such as 40% transferring immediately, 25% after 6 months and 15% after 12 months (Wexley & Latham, 2002) and 62% transferring initially, 44% after 6 months and 34% after 12 months (Saks & Belcourt, 2006).

TSOT (Tripartite System of Transfer) Model

Figure1 identifies the depth of knowledge regarding transfer of training but highlights the lack of connectivity between the known elements of workplace environment, training design, and trainee characteristics. This runs counter to the highly connected tripartite relationships in an apprenticeship programme. The TSOT framework has been designed to address this anomaly. Connectivity is vital from a systems perspective so we believe that viewing the important factors that make transfer of training successful in a holistic manner in line with the tripartite relationship of an apprenticeship will

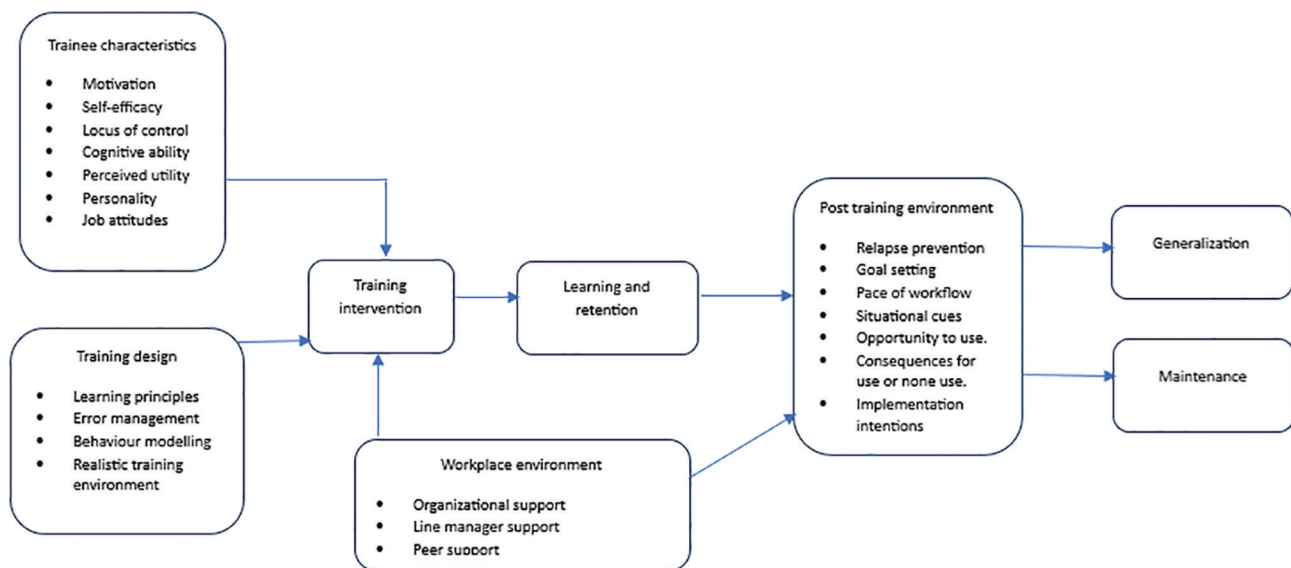


Figure 1. A Contemporary Perspective on the Transfer of Training Landscape.

further strengthen the individual success factors. Studies have looked in part at this but not fully connected all three aspects. Brinkerhoff and Montesino (1995) identified that managers and trainers working together can impact on levels of transfer. Martin (2010) considered the role of stakeholders in training design and Nikandrou et al. (2009) introduced 'project method' where trainees along with the trainer plan the training activities based on their needs. These studies provide examples of relational bridges being built between the learning and the performance environments, a key aspect of work integrated learning. They are in the minority though when considering a joined-up holistic way of supporting transfer.

We propose a new conceptual framework (Figure 2) by integrating the three input factors highlighted in the transfer of training literature with the tripartite principles of work integrated learning evident in an apprenticeship. Most apprenticeships last for a minimum of 366 days so the traditional post training environment is immersed in this. Our framework accounts for this and as a result the learning and performance environments are constantly being bridged.

Trainee Characteristics

Trainee characteristics relate to the individual learner, but the training provider and employer affect these from the outset. An apprenticeship requires an initial needs assessment to ascertain whether the learner's job role allows them to collect the required evidence. Self-assessment by the learner is corroborated by the employer and agreed with the training provider. This early tripartite relationship has the potential to

affect the learners perceived levels of support (POS) offered by the employer and training provider. A strong relationship has been found between POS and transfer of training, both directly and indirectly through mediation of self-efficacy (Islam & Ahmed, 2018). It effects self-efficacy in the form of the trainee's confidence in their capabilities to learn the content of the training and their confidence and capability to transfer what they have learned into their job role (Weisweiler et al., 2013) both of which are essential components of an apprenticeship. Discussions of new learning and perceived utility (Grossman & Salas, 2011) have also been identified as key mediators to transfer before, during, and after training (Brinkerhoff & Montesino, 1995).

There are therefore a lot of synergies between the tripartite relationship of an apprenticeship and the known variables that relate to trainee characteristics and the transfer of training. From the outset the learner is aware of the knowledge they will gain and the opportunity to use this knowledge which Wei Tian et al. (2016) identified as important. Learners are also aware that the learning and performance environments are bridged as a system with tripartite support underpinning these bridges.

Training Design

Training design factors refer most pertinently to the training provider. An apprenticeship can be delivered in diverse ways but learning content must take account of the knowledge, skills, and behaviours included in the standard assessment plan. The design of an apprenticeship must also account for tripartite reviews which are a compulsory aspect of any

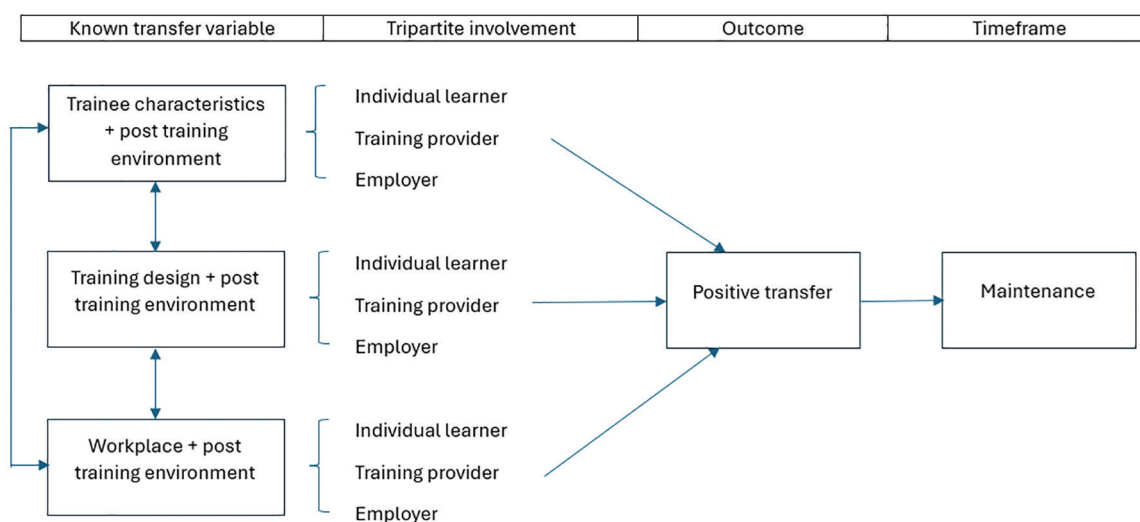


Figure 2. The Tripartite System of Transfer (TSOT).

apprenticeship. A tripartite review must take place every 12 weeks and involve the learner, employer, and training provider. These should be designed into the programme with dates agreed during the onboarding stage, so again accounting for Brinkerhoff and Montesino's (1995) assertion that support be given before, during, and after training. Tripartite reviews focus on the distal goal of apprenticeship completion but the proximal goals of incremental portfolio building so embodying the principles that proximal plus distal goals lead to greater goal achievement (Brown 2005; Brown & Warren 2014; Latham & Seijts 1999; Weldon & Yun 2000). Discussions during these reviews about portfolio completion offer another way for the systems approach of the apprenticeship to allow for incremental and maintained transfer.

Workplace Factors

Workplace factors and the post training environment are linked through the role of the line manager. Line managers should offer support through discussing what has been learned and providing encouragement and coaching, (Burke & Hutchins 2007; Grossman & Salas, 2011; Lancaster et al., 2013). Because the post training environment is immersed in the apprenticeship, the training provider also has a greater role to play. In designing the programme, the provider indicates when and what evidence to collect for the portfolio. As this is discussed every 12 weeks in the tripartite review, there is more interaction between the three parties to ensure transfer takes place. This is in keeping with Nikandrou et al.'s (2009) 'project method' as the training provider and employer will work with the learner to collect evidence.

We have so far identified where we think the tripartite relationship within an apprenticeship synthesizes with the three input factors highlighted in the transfer literature. This study uses data collected from a management apprenticeship to explore whether this has happened.

Research Design

Research Design and Context

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2018) to explore how work-based learning is experienced and reflected upon within a Level 5 Operations or Departmental Manager Apprenticeship programme. A case study design is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth, contextualized investigation of a contemporary phenomenon, in this case, the integration of formal learning and work-based practice within a specific apprenticeship programme.

Programme Context

The apprenticeship programme aligns with the nationally recognized Level 5 Operations or Departmental Manager standard. Prior to enrolment, each apprentice undertakes a needs assessment involving their line manager and the course leader. This collaborative process establishes a personalized training plan and sets up quarterly tripartite reviews to monitor progress and support development.

The HEI has developed a blended learning model delivered over three modules, each lasting 17 weeks. Blended learning combines online and face-to-face components to increase accessibility and flexibility (Boelens et al., 2018; Picciano,

2009; Savara et al., 2024; Stein & Graham, 2020). It also incorporates varied media, activities and learning events (Onguko et al., 2013). Each module includes eight weeks of in-person teaching focused on knowledge acquisition, supported by remote learning for consolidation. Work-based tasks are integrated to facilitate knowledge transfer into practical skills, and each module culminates in the submission of a Learning Application Report (LAR). The LAR serves as a reflective assignment in which learners demonstrate how newly acquired knowledge has been applied to their job roles.

Data Collection

The study draws on qualitative data from one module of the programme, focused on managing yourself (e.g., communication and personal development). The primary data source is one LAR submitted by each participant, which captures reflective accounts of their learning process and the application of theory to practice. The LAR structure supports real-time reflection-in-action making it an appropriate vehicle for examining knowledge transfer.

Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2015) was used to select participants who could provide meaningful insight into

the experience of learning transfer within the apprenticeship context. All learners in the current cohort ($n=14$) were invited to participate. As new or aspiring managers, they were well suited to contribute to the research focus on management development and reflective learning. Of the 14 eligible learners, 10 gave informed consent for their LAR to be used in the study, as detailed in Table 1.

Ethical approval was obtained from the host university. Participants were informed of the study's aims and the voluntary nature of participation. They received an information sheet and provided written consent, with assurances that non-participation would not affect their apprenticeship.

Although the sample size may appear small, qualitative research prioritizes depth and contextual richness over generalizability. Studies of similar scope have used comparable sample sizes. For example, Lim and Johnson (2002) included 10 HRD practitioners; Martin (2010) studied 12 managers; Soderhjelm et al. (2021) interviewed 12 leaders; and Greenan (2023) worked with 15 managers. The current sample of 10 learners is therefore sufficient to meet the test of adequacy (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013), especially given the study's focus on reflective practice and transfer of learning.

Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis, a flexible and widely used approach for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). LARs, submitted as Word documents via the university's virtual learning environment, were downloaded and manually coded by the research team.

Given the small dataset, manual coding was deemed appropriate. As Lester et al. (2020) observed in their review of studies using thematic analysis, manual coding remains a valid approach, particularly for smaller-scale qualitative research.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) phased approach. First, each researcher independently read the LARs to become familiar with the data and generated initial codes over several weeks. These codes were then compared, refined, and consolidated into broader categories during a second phase of coding. A summary of first-phase codes is

Table 1. Participant Information

Participant	Industry
1	Engineering
2	Education
3	Creative
4	Engineering
5	Citizens Advice
6	Education
7	Manufacturing
8	Engineering
9	Citizens Advice
10	Engineering

Table 2. Final Themes and Descriptions

Theme	Description
Acquisition of knowledge	Learners' grasp and articulation of taught content, including reference to theory and academic sources.
Application of knowledge	How learners used theoretical frameworks in practice, including critical evaluation of relevance to their roles.
Supportive relationships	The role of peers, line managers, and organizational culture in enabling or hindering knowledge application.
Utility acknowledgement	Learners' evaluation of the value and consequences of their actions, including benefits to self and organization.
Sense of self-efficacy	Insights into personal development, including reflections on capabilities, limitations, and confidence.
Commitment to continued learning	Learners' intention to maintain and expand new practices beyond the programme, demonstrating sustained engagement and optimism.

provided in Appendix A, and second-phase coding outcomes are detailed in Appendix B.

The next phase involved identifying overarching themes through collaborative analysis. The research team met to discuss and agree on six final themes, each representing a distinct aspect of the learners' experiences with knowledge acquisition and application. Appendix C details how these themes mapped to the second phase codes, and a description of the themes is provided in Table 2.

The use of thematic analysis enabled the identification of rich, nuanced insights into how apprentices reflected on and transferred learning within their workplaces. Braun and Clarke's (2006) final phase - *writing up* - is addressed in the next section.

Findings and Discussion

Ten participants consented to the use of their LAR from the first module of the programme. Through first and second-phase coding, six key themes were identified, offering insight into how learners experience and reflect on the application of taught concepts in their workplace practice. These themes allow us to address the research question which considers what specific factors within the tripartite relationship of learner, employer, and training provider are most influential in promoting effective transfer of training in management apprenticeships. Each theme is now examined in detail in the following sections.

Theme 1. Acquisition of Knowledge: The Learner's Ability to Grasp and Articulate the Taught Material

Learners articulate key concepts relevant to their work roles such as the importance of effective communication in meetings, the role of minute-taking, and the strategic value of performance management and personal development planning (PDP). They exhibit an understanding of theoretical frameworks like the Shannon-Weaver model, SWOT analysis, and Kotter's change management model, applying these concepts to practical workplace scenarios. For instance, Participant 1 noted that accurate minute taking is a crucial part of any meeting, as it makes a record of all discussions and decisions made. The minute taker is the receiver in the Shannon-Weaver model, receiving the message and making it available to others.

They further emphasize the need for structured communication and preparation, such as using agendas to manage meetings and engaging in self-reflection through PDPs. Participant 3 for example, stressed the importance of pre-meeting preparation, citing the role of the chair in establishing a written agenda to clarify objectives and enable informed participation.

The apprenticeship programme's pedagogical design featuring the integration of work-related tasks within each module has

enabled learners to identify immediate utility (Grossman & Salas, 2011; Martin, 2010). This perceived immediacy enhances learner motivation to acquire knowledge and contributes to increased confidence and competence in skill transfer to their job role (Weisweiler et al., 2013). Furthermore, the inclusion of reflective components through the LAR supports formative self-assessment, encouraging learners to evaluate task outcomes, interrogate their understanding, and identify areas for further development.

Theme 2. Application of Knowledge: How Learners Applied Theoretical Concepts and Frameworks in Practice

Structured opportunities for the application of skills to the job role are essential (Wei Tian et al., 2016). Findings from the present study indicate that learners were equipped to execute work-based tasks with confidence, suggesting that employer facilitation and support mechanisms were effective. For instance, Participant 1 consciously mitigated "egocentric bias" during meeting scheduling by prioritizing the availability of all attendees, an approach explicitly informed by the work of Whillans et al. (2021). This behaviour reflects purposeful integration of communication theory into pragmatic decision-making.

Further illustration of theoretical enactment emerged in Participant 3's utilization of De Bono's (1985) 'six thinking hats' methodology to structure dialogue, including the deliberate inclusion of a colleague with a 'black hat' perspective to anticipate and explore potential risks. Other participants drew on their acquired knowledge about the value of asking open questions. For example, Participant 2 referenced Cuncic (2022) within their LAR, identifying open-ended questioning as instrumental in cultivating active listening. They also relied on consensus-building strategies to ensure all decisions were reached collaboratively.

Collectively, these examples underscore enhanced learner self-efficacy and an increased perception of relevance between academic study and professional application. The portfolio requirement, mandating tangible evidence of learning and reflexive commentary appears to strengthen implementation intentions (Friedman & Ronen, 2015; Greenan, 2023; Greenan et al., 2017), so negating the option of doing nothing with the new knowledge and skill. Employer support and the provision of experiential learning opportunities have played a vital role in enabling learners to traverse the boundary between educational and occupational spheres. In this respect the learning environment and performance environment are constantly being bridged as our theoretical model indicated.

Additionally, learners exhibited criticality when applying theoretical models to real-time professional scenarios. For example, Participant 5 chose not to directly reference De Bono's model during a meeting, concerned that it would slow

down the discussion, instead focusing on the underlying principles to steer the conversation towards positive outcomes. Although this may be viewed as negative transfer, it signals a nuanced understanding of contextual sensitivity and the capacity to modulate theoretical tools in accordance with the situational context.

Theme 3. Supportive Relationships: The Role of Workplace Relationships in Facilitating the Application of Learning

Line manager support is frequently identified as a critical factor in facilitating effective transfer of learning within organizational contexts (Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Islam & Ahmed, 2018; Kim et al., 2019.; Nijman et al., 2006). By contrast, peer support is typically perceived as having a less pronounced impact. However, findings from our analysis challenge this assumption, demonstrating that both peer and managerial support play substantive roles in enabling learners to apply acquired knowledge. Specifically, participants reported receiving emotional encouragement and practical assistance from colleagues and supervisors, which proved instrumental in the transfer process.

Participant 1 exemplified this dynamic by describing a collaborative experience with a colleague who provided structured and patient guidance on a technical system: “He broke down everything into very simple pieces and I swiftly and effectively increased my knowledge of the system.” Similarly, Participant 2 described how consulting a colleague to organize meeting agendas and minutes led to positive feedback from attendees, thereby enhancing confidence in their ability to facilitate discussions. These accounts suggest that supportive interpersonal relationships contribute meaningfully to learners’ sense of self-efficacy.

A mandatory requirement of an apprenticeship framework is that employers are required to allocate a minimum of six hours per week to off-the-job training. Our data indicate that learners were able to fulfil the requisite tasks within this period, suggesting that employers have been supportive of the policy. In addition to direct managerial involvement, learners also highlight the importance of an organizational culture that fosters support and encourages collaboration. For instance, Participant 2 noted the importance of seeking guidance from various departments when setting achievable goals in their PDP, while Participant 5 discussed how sharing their PDP with their manager helped them stay accountable and committed to their goals. Goal setting, traditionally associated within the post-training environment, emerged in this study as a pivotal element within the apprenticeship structure itself. Incorporating goal setting into the learning framework facilitated the enactment of key principles such as the pursuit of proximal goals in support of distal objectives

(Brown, 2005; Brown & Warren, 2014; Latham & Seijts, 1999; Weldon & Yun, 2000). This was further reinforced by the tripartite review process, which provided ongoing monitoring of work-based task completion and enabled learners to adjust their goals, as necessary.

Theme 4. Utility Acknowledgement: Recognition of Personal, Professional, and Organizational Benefits Derived from Application of Learning

Evidence of significant personal development emerged from the data, with learners attributing their progress to the implementation of structured techniques. Tools such as PDPs, and time-management techniques (e.g. time-blocking strategies, and the Pomodoro Technique) were cited as instrumental in enhancing productivity and fostering self-discipline. These methods not only facilitated task completion but also reinforced learners’ confidence and dedication to sustained personal growth.

Participant 4 described the positive impact of proactively seeking additional responsibilities during an extended meeting, remarking that the experience was “extremely rewarding in terms of personal development and progression.”

They further noted gains in presentation and communication skills, aligning with best practices outlined by Rathod (2019), and expressed an understanding of how to continue improving these competencies. This reflective insight underscores the concept of maintenance, which will be discussed shortly.

Learners also identified improvements at the organizational level. The strategic preparation and execution of meetings were credited with enhancing communication quality and fostering active engagement among participants. According to Participant 10, a successful client call resulted not only in timely financial transactions but also in the development of rapport with key stakeholders. This relationship has since evolved into regular weekly meetings, illustrating the value of dynamic inter-organizational communication.

These findings suggest that individual development initiatives can yield immediate organizational benefits, particularly in operational efficiency and stakeholder relations. The integration of personal growth strategies within professional contexts appears to generate tangible outcomes both for learners and their respective organizations.

Theme 5. Sense of Self Efficacy: How the Experience Shaped the Learner’s Perceptions of Their Past, Present, and Future Abilities

The reflective accounts provided by the learners illustrate a progressive shift in their perceptions of personal capability, spanning their past, present, and future abilities. Initial accounts revealed apprehension and self-doubt, particularly in undertaking unfamiliar roles such as chairing meetings. Participant 2 acknowledged, “At first, I felt uneasy and

nervous at the prospect of chairing a meeting,” while Participant 5 confessed, “I feel in the past I have tried to avoid discussions that require assertiveness.” However, as learners assumed greater responsibility, a discernible transformation was observed, characterized by increased confidence and anticipation of future success. For example, Participant 5 reported, “I was excited to be able to use the skills I have learnt and was hopeful for positive outcomes.” Weisweiler et al., (2013) brought attention to self-efficacy of learners in first learning the material and then applying it and this comment demonstrates both. The support offered by the training provider and the employer has therefore strengthened the learner’s overall self-efficacy leading to positive transfer.

Consistent with the previous theme, contributions of others play a significant role in the learner’s shift in confidence. Feedback from colleagues and supervisors played a pivotal role, as evidenced by Participant 2’s reflection: “Receiving this feedback gave me confidence and encouraged me to believe that I am capable of leading group discussions, which in the past I have been afraid to do.” Line managers providing encouragement (Burke & Hutchins, 2007) and peer support which enhances transfer by improving employee’s feelings of self-efficacy (Martin, 2010) have been identified in Figure 1. The response from Participant 2 indicates that the content delivered by the training provider had been internalized and translated into behavioural change, suggesting successful knowledge transfer. Moreover, employer involvement in facilitating experimentation and providing evaluative feedback further reinforced this development. In this regard, the collaborative tripartite relationship comprising the learner, employer, and training provider emerged as a key enabler of positive transfer outcomes.

In addition to increased confidence, learners demonstrated heightened self-awareness and adaptability. For example, as they reflected on communication skills, particularly in relation to body language Participant 4 noted, “I have realized that my natural posture is not becoming of someone that wants to be taken seriously,” suggesting an awareness of how body language may influence perceived authority. Similarly, Participant 5 addressed challenges with time management and attentiveness, stating, “I found that I was always checking my emails, which was my biggest issue with active listening.” These insights reflect an evolving understanding of personal limitations and the need for strategies to enhance their self-efficacy in communication. Overall, the integration of instructional content (training provider), reflective practice (learner), and workplace application (employer) constitutes a dynamic tripartite model that appears to significantly support the transfer of learning in this context.

Theme 6. Commitment to Continued Application and Experimentation: A Future Focused Orientation

The data reveal a pronounced intention among learners to maintain and build upon the practices and competencies cultivated throughout the apprenticeship programme. Participants articulated a forward-looking mindset and sustained motivation for continuous improvement. For example, Participant 1 remarked, “I am now well focused on pursuing the mid and long term goals,” signalling goal-oriented thinking and strategic planning. Similarly, others highlighted the value of refining specific techniques such as time management and structured meeting preparation. This practical integration of new habits into professional routines is exemplified by Participant 5’s comment: “I will also continue to utilize detailed agendas and pre-meeting preparation.” Participants also demonstrated awareness of areas requiring further development, expressing intentions to pursue feedback, engage in shadowing experiences, and enhance technical skills. The continued use of tools such as the PDP) was frequently noted as instrumental in tracking progress and aligning learning with career goals. Participant 8 stated, “I will be updating the PDP when I complete one of the actions,” reflecting a proactive approach to developmental monitoring. While previous themes have highlighted the distinct contributions of the tripartite actors, learner, employer, and training provider, this final theme offers compelling evidence of maintenance, a critical endpoint in the transfer of training. This indicative content suggests more than 40% (Wexley & Latham, 2002) or even 62% (Saks & Belcourt, 2006) of learners have continued to use their new knowledge and skill past the initial days of post training. Whilst the intention is clear, whether such practices are sustained post-apprenticeship remains undetermined and falls beyond the scope of the current analysis. Future research may wish to explore the extent to which these behaviours persist once the training provider exits the learning ecosystem and the dynamic shifts to a more traditional bilateral employer-employee relationship.

Overall, these findings broaden the existing literature by emphasizing the importance of a holistic transfer climate. In particular, the coordinated engagement of all three stakeholders within a work-integrated apprenticeship model appears essential to ensuring that the full spectrum of factors influencing transfer are adequately addressed.

Practical Implications

While this study offers promising evidence for the adoption of a holistic transfer of training model, it is important to acknowledge that neither organizational nor individual acceptance can be

presumed. Successful implementation is contingent upon the existence or rapid cultivation of a robust learning culture within the organization. Without such a foundation, efforts to overcome known barriers to transfer are likely to falter.

Opportunities for deliberate practice and skill application are essential for embedding new behaviours in the workplace (Wei Tian et al., 2016). The literature identifies several critical work system factors that facilitate training transfer, including behavioural cues to prompt the application of new skills and clear consequences linked to on-the-job utilization (Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Cheng & Ho, 2001; Martin, 2010). In the absence of these enabling conditions, particularly where development cultures are weak or underdeveloped, employees may experience frustration and disengagement (Clarke, 2002; Greenan, 2016), resulting in minimal or negative transfer. This presents a significant, yet indispensable, organizational challenge that must be addressed to ensure the effectiveness of the tripartite model. Organizations looking to successfully make their management development worthwhile must therefore consider the degree to which their learning culture is ready for this.

Even in organizations where a development-oriented culture is present, the success of the model still depends on adequate training and support for line managers. While the current study conceptualizes the external training provider as a key tripartite actor, an internal training and development team may alternatively fill this role. In alignment with previous scholarship advocating for collaborative approaches to workforce development (Brinkerhoff & Montesino, 1995; Martin, 2010), we argue that effective implementation requires shared understanding and capability among all involved stakeholders. This necessitates investment in training not only for apprentices, but also for those responsible for facilitating and supporting the learning environment.

Such capacity-building is particularly critical within apprenticeship programmes governed by formal standards and oversight bodies, including Ofsted and Skills England. Nevertheless, the principles articulated here are applicable to any initiative seeking to operationalize the tripartite model of training transfer. As with all well-designed development strategies, the provision of adequate time and resources is essential. Without these, the potential for immediate and sustained individual and organizational development is lost. Organizations must therefore ensure that employees will be given the time and resources required to enable practical application of skills to their job role.

Limitations and Future Research Agenda

Whilst the results of this study have been positive, there are limitations. These, however, can serve as the catalyst

for a future research agenda. Our sample consisted of learners from different organizations but was limited in size. Numerous cohorts could be studied along with larger cohort sizes to build a larger evidence base. Furthermore, the scope of industries involved in research could be widened. Management exists in all industrial sectors, so we encourage researchers to focus on these different sectors. We also acknowledge that apprenticeships exist outside of management, and the same tripartite relationship exists. To further evaluate our model, we encourage researchers to apply it to all types and levels of apprenticeship. Finally, in terms of widening the potential of the tripartite model, we urge researchers to apply it to in-house training and development that is not governed by apprenticeship standards. If successful transfer of training can be demonstrated in these wider aspects, there is more potential for organization development to be successful.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to combine a systems approach with the principles of work-integrated learning to evaluate the usefulness of a tripartite model of transfer. The research question asked what specific factors within the tripartite relationship between the learner, employer, and training provider are most influential in promoting effective transfer of training in management apprenticeships.

Our findings indicate the most critical factor is the interdependence of each actor on the others to fulfil their respective roles within the apprenticeship. The apprenticeship system functions effectively only when all parties actively engage with and uphold their responsibilities. This interdependence is characterized by what might be termed “subconscious breaking points,” critical junctures at which the failure of one actor to meet their obligations can disrupt the entire system. For example, if the training provider does not design and deliver an appropriate curriculum, there is no formal knowledge base for the learner to engage with. If the employer fails to provide opportunities for practical application, the learner cannot build the portfolio of evidence. Conversely, if the learner does not collect this evidence, the employer is alerted during the tripartite review process, and progress may be slowed or even halted.

Early and explicit communication of these role expectations is essential. The initial needs assessment and onboarding process associated with the apprenticeship are instrumental in establishing clarity and mutual accountability, suggesting that such preparatory engagement should be a foundational element of all apprenticeship programmes.

While the findings of this study are promising, they highlight the need for further empirical validation to substantiate the claim that a systems-based approach enhances the effectiveness of training transfer and contributes to improved productivity offered by an apprenticeship model. This also paves the way for consideration of this approach in all development activity, not just management apprenticeships.

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Appendices

Appendix A. First Phase Coding

Coder	Code	Extent *	Coder	Code	Extent*
Researcher 1	Practical application	49	Researcher 2	Demonstration of knowledge informed by literature	10
	Understanding theory	40		Justification given for approach with reference to literature	18
	Understanding why	38		Critical discussion of choices made – acknowledging constraints and risks	4
	Uncertainty	9		Future orientation	14
	Reflection	37		Seeking experiences that will benefit skill development	1
	Maintenance	26		Perception that application of new knowledge/skills contributing to positive experience/outcomes	21
	Optimistic	3		Use of framework/model/theory/research for self-evaluation/self-awareness	8
	Unintended consequences	4		New insights about self as a result of task	4
	Peer support	6		Enlisting support or intention to enlist support	4
	Peer reaction	8		Apprehension – going beyond normal duties/normal way of doing something	2
	Enthusiastic	6		Reflection about challenges encountered	6
	Nervous	8		Reflection about what was 'easy'	1
	Successful application	31		Peer feedback contributed to confidence	1
	Confidence	16		Intention to 'stretch' in future	2
	Line manager support	8		Application of learning beyond self to wider organization	1
	Difficult	8		Adopting approach that departs from literature – justifying this.	3
	Caution	4		Unable to see relevance in own organizational context	1
	Negative	4			

*Refers to the number of comments assigned to this code.

Appendix B. Second Phase Coding

First phase code (Researcher 1)	First phase code (Researcher 2)	Second phase code amalgamation	Extent*
Practical application	Demonstration of knowledge informed by literature	• Demonstration of knowledge informed by literature	50
Understanding theory	Justification given for approach with reference to literature	• Understanding theory	
Understanding why	Critical discussion of choices made – acknowledging constraints and risks	• Justification given for approach with reference to literature	63
Uncertainty	Future orientation	• Understanding why	
Reflection	Seeking experiences that will benefit skill development	• Negative	
		• Adopting approach that departs from literature – justifying this	
Maintenance	Perception that application of new knowledge/skills contributing to positive experience/outcomes	• Critical discussion of choices made – acknowledging constraints and risks	107
Optimistic	Use of framework/model/theory/research for self-evaluation/self-awareness	• Perception that application of new knowledge/skills contributing to positive experience/outcomes	
Unintended consequences	New insights about self as a result of task	• Reflection about what was 'easy'	
Peer support	Enlisting support or intention to enlist support	• Application of learning beyond self to wider organization	
Peer reaction	Apprehension – going beyond normal duties/normal way of doing something	• Practical application	
Enthusiastic	Reflection about challenges encountered	• Successful application	
Nervous	Reflection about what was 'easy'		43
Successful application	Peer feedback contributed to confidence	• Future orientation	
Confidence	Intention to 'stretch' in future	• Maintenance	
		• Optimistic	
Line manager support	Application of learning beyond self to wider organization	• Seeking experiences that will benefit skill development	95
Difficult	Adopting approach that departs from literature – justifying this.	• Use of framework/model/theory/research for self-evaluation/self-awareness	
Caution	Unable to see relevance in own organizational context	• New insights about self as a result of task	
		• Reflection about challenges encountered	
		• Intention to 'stretch' in future	
		• Uncertainty	
		• Reflection	
		• Confidence	
		• Difficult	
		• Caution	
Peer support	Peer feedback contributed to confidence	• Enlisting support or intention to enlist support	19
Peer reaction	Enlisting support or intention to enlist support	• Peer feedback contributed to confidence	
		• Peer support	
		• Peer reaction	
Line manager support	Enlisting support or intention to enlist support	• Line manager support	12
		• Enlisting support or intention to enlist support	
Not amalgamated due to low compatibility		• Apprehension – going beyond normal duties/normal way of doing something	
		• Unable to see relevance in own organizational context	
		• Nervous	
		• Enthusiastic	
		• Unintended consequences	

*Refers to the number of comments assigned to this code

Appendix C. Generation and agreement of final themes

Second phase code amalgamation	Theme	Explanation of theme
Understanding theory	Acquisition of knowledge	This theme focuses on the learner's ability to grasp and articulate the taught material. It highlights instances where learners demonstrated understanding by recounting theory and citing relevant sources.
- Demonstration of knowledge informed by literature - Justification given for approach with reference to literature - Understanding why - Negative - Adopting approach that departs from literature – justifying this	Application of knowledge	Building on the knowledge gained in theme one, this theme examines how learners applied theoretical concepts and frameworks in practice. It explores how learners used the knowledge they acquired to justify their actions in the workplace, critically assessed the relevance of theories to their roles and identified when certain theories and frameworks were not applicable due to specific job contexts.
- Line manager support - Enlisting support or intention to enlist support - Peer feedback contributed to confidence - Peer support - Peer reaction	Supportive relationships	This theme investigates the role of workplace relationships, including interactions with line managers and peers, in facilitating the application of learning. It also considers the organizational culture of support and reflects on the assistance received before and during the apprenticeship, as well as expectations for future support.
- Critical discussion of choices made – acknowledging constraints and risks - Perception that application of new knowledge/skills contributing to positive experience/outcomes - Reflection about what was 'easy' - Application of learning beyond self to wider organization - Practical application - Successful application	Utility acknowledgement	This theme centres on the learner's critical appraisal of their experiences. It encompasses the evaluation of decisions made and actions taken, including perceived benefits for both the learner and the organization.
- Seeking experiences that will benefit skill development - Use of framework/model/theory/research for self-evaluation/self-awareness - New insights about self as a result of task - Reflection about challenges encountered - Intention to 'stretch' in future - Uncertainty - Reflection - Confidence - Difficult - Caution	Sense of self efficacy	This theme considers the introspective dimension of the learning process, exploring how the experience shaped the learner's perceptions of their past, present, and future abilities. It includes reflections on their capacity to learn and apply new concepts, as well as an awareness of personal strengths and limitations.
- Future orientation - Maintenance - Optimistic	Commitment to continued application and experimentation	This theme focuses on the learner's intention to maintain and expand upon new practices developed during the apprenticeship. Optimism and sustained energy for continued development after the apprenticeship are key aspects of this theme.

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