APPRENTICESHIP WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

DELIVERED BY aoc aelp EDUCATION & TRAINING FOUNDATION SDN SQW UVAC UNIVERSITY VOCATIONAL AWARDS COUNCIL

FUNDED BY Department for Education

Learning from doing

Introduction

Different approaches and techniques have been developed to aid learning from action. This resource explores the idea of a 'cycle' of learning from action, then enlarges on three approaches that are useful for learning from practice and connecting it with theory.

Purpose

This resource is designed to complement the content of the AWD course 'Integration of on-the-job and off-the-job learning/training', 'Planning the integration of on and off-the-job training', 'Improving curriculum design for apprentice success', 'Planning Effective Curriculum Design' and 'Planning and maintaining high quality and effective teaching and training'. It can, however, also be used as a stand-alone resource if you haven't yet attended the courses.

How to use

This resource is to support practitioner thinking about approaching apprenticeship learning as a cycle is a useful way of making the most of a work activity, episode or project that can be approached in advance. The basic cycle is like the Kolb or Revans learning cycle or action research cycle. It can be used at any level of apprenticeship skills development using appropriate levels of support and structuring.

The learning cycle

The four stages are:

1. **Planning**. What task or problem are you tackling? What do you need do to complete the task or solve the problem? What do you need to know first? If there are alternative options, which one is most likely to be most effective or efficient?

2. **Doing**. Put the plan into action and keep track of what happens. You might want to keep notes or make audio or video recordings at this stage, depending in what is easy in the situation (and allowable).

3. **Reviewing**. This asks what happened: did it go as planned, or have the effect that was wanted? Why / why not? Were there any unexpected results? What else could you have done? What options are there now, or could you modify what you are doing? What would the effects be? What have you learned? Reviewing need not wait until the end of the 'doing' stage, but for a longer activity can be interspersed through it.

4. **Concluding and deciding**. What are the next steps? What have you learned from the process? Before doing it (or something similar) again do you need to learn anything more, or change how you would approach it?

The cycle can be entered at the planning, doing or reviewing stages, and run through as many times as needed. It normally ends with the concluding and deciding stage.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice is often associated with the work of Donald Schön and professions such as architecture, planning, teaching and nursing. It can also seem quite vague, particularly if learners new to the idea of reflection aren't given a structure to help them reflect. It is simple and practical though, and it underpins good-quality, thoughtful work at any level of skill. It can be built into coaching sessions and learning conversations and become an automatic part of carrying out work tasks and projects. Reflection can take place at four stages in relation to a work task, project or episode, approximately mirroring the learning cycle stages above.

These are:

1. **Reflection before action**. What does this task involve? What do I want to achieve? What do I know about the processes and principles that are involved? Am I confident about doing it, or do I need to look anything up or ask for advice?

2. **Reflection in action**. Is the work going as I expect? Could I improve it by doing anything differently? Do I need to pause to rethink?

3. **Reflection on action**. What happened? Did it go as planned, and why/why not? Is there anything I could do differently next time?

4. **Reflection after action**. What did I learn from that work episode at a more general level? How does it change my understanding? What more can I learn (and how)?

The different stages can be done with the support of a tutor or mentor (or in discussion with other learners), or alone as the learner gains confidence and practice. At first learners may benefit from support with all four stages, then progressively with less support for the second, third and first stage. Reflection on action can be done with colleagues involved in the same task, while reflection after action lends itself to discussion with others or to writing up.

Reviewing incidents and episodes

Critical incident analysis was developed by J C Flanagan for use in industrial psychology, but its principles can be used more widely to focus reflection and review on specific incidents and episodes that are useful for learning. These are not just things that go wrong; it is important to learn from

successes as well.   The following sequence can be used (or adapted for use) at any level and with all scales of activity.

- Identify an incident or episode to be reviewed. This should be something that includes some learning points, whether they are things that went particularly well, or things that could be done better. Focus on events, incidents or episodes that can be analysed in detail, not long and complex series of events. Incidents and episodes can be picked out by a tutor or mentor, or learners can be asked to identify them (this exercise can only be done with an individual or a group who were involved in the same episode, unless it is being used as an example or case-study).

- Ask the learner or learners involved to describe each incident or episode in detail, including:
  - Its context, particularly any factors that may have been relevant to the actions that were taken.
  - What happened, in as much detail as possible and as a sequence of events.
  - Where relevant and possible, the thoughts and feelings of participants in the event *at the time*. Use prompts to improve the description, but do not judge or evaluate anything until the description is complete.

- Now review the description to identify what was going on and, in particular, what made the actions successful or unsuccessful.   For this step it is important to get the learner(s) to 'own' the analysis by asking relevant questions, not to superimpose your (tutor/trainer's) analysis on their description. Some pointers include:

  - What was the purpose of the episode – what were the people involved in it trying to achieve?
  - What, overall, was going on to achieve (or frustrate) these aims?
  - What specific actions made it successful or unsuccessful?
  - How do the thoughts and feelings of the people in the event relate to their actions?
  - What if anything could have been improved?

- Finally, (help the apprentice to) summarise what has been learned from the incident or episode, and what they will do next. There may also be some learning points for the workplace that can be fed back.

Action learning

Action learning can refer to any form of learning through practice, but it is used here in the way pioneered by Reg Revans: learning in groups or 'sets' to tackle practical problems. Revans worked with groups of managers who would meet at intervals to discuss issues that they are facing. Each participant takes turns as the 'presenter' to outline a problem or issue, while the others act as consultants or counsellors usually supported by a facilitator. Participants then go away to work on their issues at work, and report back on progress in the next meeting.

Action learning is not just for managers and both the applications, and the process can be adapted for learners in different situations. It could be used for instance with healthcare workers providing care to people in their homes; fitters installing and repairing appliances; or IT professionals creating digital applications. Sets need not meet in person, and live online sessions can work well; asynchronous

(webchat-style) ones can work, but they need to be very well managed. There are some basic principles for making an action learning process work:

- Participants must already have some knowledge and insights about the area they are working in, so that they are able to help fellow learners. An action learning process is unlikely to suit novices, but it can be useful once learners have some knowledge and experience and can be considered 'advanced beginners'. To start with, action learning can be focussed on a particular topic or area of work that all the participants will be familiar with.

- The rules of the learning 'set' need to be set out and agreed at the start. These are normally things like confidentiality; agreement to provide helpful comments and insights, not personal criticism; making sure everyone has 'space' to present and receive input on their issues; and that issues and solutions are owned by the person raising them (no 'telling people what to do').

- 'Sets' normally need a facilitator, although a group that is experienced and confident in action learning can work without one. Normally a minimum of three people is needed, and the maximum should not be so big that it becomes unwieldy – six or seven is a workable size.

- Participants must focus on helping the presenter and must not weigh in with what they would do or what they did in a similar situation. If a participant thinks that an anecdote, personal experience or piece of advice might help, they should ask the presenter first.

- A basic structure can be useful to focus discussions. Revans advocated using a learning cycle, as shown earlier, but the four stages of reflection or a critical incident approach could work equally well. Ideally the presenter should shape the discussion as appropriate to the problem, with the help of the facilitator.

The facilitator's role is likely to be critical at the beginning, particularly with a group of learners who are not familiar with this kind of discussion. The facilitator can also lead a concluding discussion about more generally applicable learning points, particularly where one of the aims is to link the points being raised into the wider curriculum or draw out points relevant to all learners in the group.