LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

THE OBJECTIVES OF THIS CHAPTER ARE TO:

1 EXPLORE FOUR PERSPECTIVES ON THE NATURE OF LEARNING AND CONSIDER THE IMPLICATIONS THAT EACH HAS FOR DEVELOPMENT PROVISION AND SUPPORT

2 REVIEW SOME OF THE PRACTICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

3 EXPLAIN THE VARIOUS METHODS OF ADDRESSING LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

4 INVESTIGATE THE NATURE OF EVALUATION IN THIS CONTEXT

There has been a considerable shift in the way that individual development is under-stood and characterised. We have moved from identifying training needs to identi-fying learning needs, the implication being that development is owned by the learner with the need rather than by the trainer seeking to satisfy that need. This also has implications for who identifies the needs and the way that those needs are met. Current thinking suggests that needs are best developed by a partnership between the individual and the organisation, and that the methods of meeting these needs are not limited only to formal courses, but to a wide range of on-the-job development methods and distance/e-learning approaches. There has also been a shift in the type of skills that are the focus of development activity. Hallier and Butts (1999) for example identify a change from an interest in technical skills to the development of personal skills, self-management and attitudes. Lastly, while the focus on develop-ment for the current job remains high, there is greater pressure for development which is also future oriented. These shifts reflect the changes that we have already discussed in terms of global competition, fast and continuous change and the need for individuals to develop their employability in an increasingly uncertain world.

THE NATURE OF LEARNING

For the purpose of this text we consider the result of learning to be changed or new behaviour resulting from new or reinterpreted knowledge that has been derived from an external or internal experience. There are broadly four theoretical approaches or perspectives to understanding the nature of learning, and the training and develop-ment that organisations carry out reflect the explicit or implicit acceptance of one or more perspectives. We will look at each perspective, in the evolutionary order in which they became important. There is no right or wrong theory – each has strengths and weaknesses.

The **behaviourist** perspective is the earliest which, reflecting the label, concentrates on changes in observable behaviour. Experiments with animals formed the founda-tion of this theory, for example the work of Skinner, Watson and Pavlov. Researchers sought to associate rewards with certain behaviours in order to increase the display of that behaviour. The relevance of this for organisations today may be seen for example in telesales training where employees are taught to follow a script and calls are listened to, to ensure that the script is followed. Reward or punishment follows depending on behaviour. Trainers are not interested in what is going on in the heads of employees, they merely want them to follow the routine to be learned. This approach has also been used for a range of interpersonal skills training. One American company, for example plays video sequences to trainees portraying the 'correct' way to carry out, say, a return to work interview. Trainees then practise copying what they have seen and are given cue cards to use when carrying out that particular inter-personal event. The problems with the perspective are that it is overtly manipulative, simplistic and limited. It may produce only temporary changes in behaviour and increase cynicism.

Cognitive approaches are based on an information-processing perspective and are more concerned with what goes on in the learner's head. This is a more technical per-spective and maps out the stages of learning such as: expectancy to learn (motiva-tion); attention and perception required; experience is coded (meaning is derived); meaning is stored in long-term memory; meaning is retrieved when needed; learning

is applied; feedback is received (which may supply reinforcement). The strengths of this perspective are that it stresses the importance of learner motivation and individual needs, it recognises that the individual has some control over what is learned and it identifies feedback as an important aspect of learning. The weaknesses are that it assumes learning is neutral and unproblematic and it is a purely rational approach that ignores emotion. From this perspective useful development activities would be seen as formal courses offering models and ideas with lots of back-up paperwork. Activities to improve learning motivation are also important, for example helping employees to recognise their own development needs and providing rewards for skills development. Mechanisms for providing feedback to employees are also key.

The third perspective is based on **social learning theory**, in other words learning is a social activity and this is based on our needs as humans to fit in with others. In organisations this happens to some extent naturally as we learn to fit in with things such as dress codes, behaviour in meetings and so on. Fitting in means that we can be accepted as successful in the organisation, but it is not necessary that we internalise and believe in these codes. Organisations use often role models, mentors and peer support, and 'buddies', to intensify our natural will to fit in. The disadvantages of this perspective are that it ignores the role of choice for the individual and it is based, to some extent, on a masquerade.

The **constructivist** perspective is a development of the information-processing perspective, but does not regard learning as a neutral process: it is our perception of our experiences that count; there is no 'objective' view. This perspective accepts that in our dealings with the world we create 'meaning structures' in our heads and these are based on our past experiences and personality. New information and potential learning need to fit with these meaning structures in some way, which means that a similar new experience will be understood differently by different people. We tend to pay attention to things which fit with our meaning structures and ignore or avoid things that don't fit. As humans we are also capable of constructing and reconstructing our meaning structures without any new experiences. These meaning structures are mainly unconscious and therefore we are not aware of the structures which constrain our learning. We are generally unaware of how valid our meanings sets are, and they are deeply held and difficult to change. Making these structures explicit enables us to challenge them and to start to change them. This perspective recognises that learning is a very personal and potentially threatening process. We develop mechanisms to protect ourselves from this threat, and thus protect ourselves from learning. The implication of this is that learning support needs to encourage introspection and reflection, and providing the perspectives of others (for example as in 360-degree feedback, outdoor courses or relocations) may assist in this process.

PRACTICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Learning from experience

There has been a significant amount of work done which helps us understand how managers, and others, learn from their experiences. Kolb *et al.* (1984) argue that it is useful to combine the characteristics of learning, which is usually regarded as
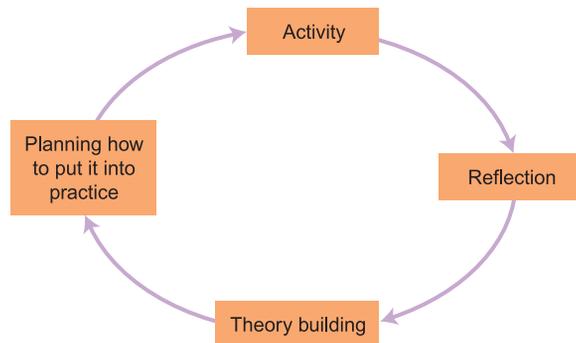
Figure 18.1 The learning cycle

passive, with those of problem solving, which is usually regarded as active. From this combination Kolb *et al*. developed a four-stage learning cycle, which was further developed by Honey and Mumford (1989).

The four stages, based on the work of both groups of researchers, are shown in Figure 18.1.

WINDOW ON PRACTICE

Gwen is a management trainer in a large organisation running a number of in-house management courses. She has just moved into this position from her role as section leader in the research department; the move was seen as a career development activity in order to strengthen her managerial skills.

Gwen is working with her manager to learn from her experiences. Here is an extract from her learning diary based on the learning cycle:

Activity – I've had a go at running three sessions on my own now, doing the input and handling the questions.

Reflection – I find the input much easier than handling questions. When I'm asked a question and answer it I have the feeling that they're not convinced by my reply and I feel awkward that we seem to finish the session hanging in mid-air. I would like to be able to encourage more open discussion.

Theory building – If I give an answer to a question it closes off debate by the fact that I have 'pronounced' what is 'right'. If I want them to discuss I have to avoid giving my views at first.

Planning practice – When I am asked a question rather than answering it I will say to the group: 'What does anyone think about that?' or 'What do you think?' (to the individual who asked) or 'What are the possibilities here?' I will keep encouraging them to respond to each other and reinforce where necessary, or help them change tack by asking another question.

Each of these four stages of the learning cycle is critical to effective learning, but few people are strong at each stage and it is helpful to understand where our strengths and weaknesses lie. Honey and Mumford designed a questionnaire to achieve this which identified individuals' learning styles as 'activist', 'reflector', 'theorist' and 'pragmatist', and explain that:

- **Activists** learn best from 'having a go', and trying something out without necessarily preparing. They would be enthusiastic about role-play exercises and keen to take risks in the real environment.

- **Reflectors** are much better at listening and observing. They are effective at reflecting on their own and others' experiences and good at analysing what happened and why.

- **Theorists'** strengths are in building a concept or a theory on the basis of their analysis. They are good at integrating different pieces of information, and building models of the way things operate. They may choose to start their learning by reading around a topic.

- **Pragmatists** are keen to *use* whatever they learn and will always work out how they can apply it in a real situation. They will plan how to put it into practice. They will value information/ideas they are given only if they can see how to relate them to practical tasks they need to do.

Understanding how individuals learn from experience underpins all learning, but is particularly relevant in encouraging self-development activities. Understanding our strengths and weaknesses enables us to choose learning activities which suit our style, and gives us the opportunity to decide to strengthen a particularly weak learning stage of our learning cycle. While Honey and Mumford adopt this dual approach, Kolb firmly maintains that learners *must* become deeply competent at all stages of the cycle. There has been considerable attention to the issue of matching and mismatching styles with development activities: *see*, for example, Hayes and Allinson (1996), who also consider the matching and mismatching of trainer learning style with learner learning style.

ACTIVITY 18.1

1 If you have not already done so obtain the Honey and Mumford questionnaire and work out your learning style(s).

2 Select your weakest style and try to identify two different learning activities which fit with this style, but that you would normally avoid.

3 Seek opportunities for trying out these learning activities. If you practise these activities on a regular basis this should help you strengthen the style you are working on.

4 Log your experiences and in particular what you have learned about these 'new' learning activities.

Learner type	Planned learning score	Emergent learning score
Sage	High	High
Warrior	High	Low
Adventurer	Low	High
Sleeper	Low	Low

Table 18.1
Planned and
emergent
learning

Source: Adapted from D. Megginson (1994) 'Planned and emergent learning: A framework and a method', *Executive Development*, Vol. 7, No. 6, pp. 29–32.

Planned and emergent learning

From a different, but compatible, perspective, David Megginson characterises learners by the extent to which they plan the direction of their learning and implement this (planned learning), and the extent to which they are able to learn from opportunistic learning experiences (emergent learning). Megginson (1994) suggests that strengths and weaknesses in these two areas will influence the way individuals react to self-development. These two characteristics are not mutually exclusive, and Megginson combines them to identify four learning types, as shown in Table 18.1.

Warriors are those who are strong at planning what they want to learn and how, but are less strong at learning from experiences they had not ancticipated. They have a clear focus on what they want to learn and pursue this persistently. On the other hand *Adventurers* respond to and learn from opportunities that come along unexpectedly, they are curious and flexible. However, they tend not to plan and create opportunities for themselves. *Sages* are strong on both characteristics, and *Sleepers* display little of either characteristic at present. To be most effective in self-development activities learners need to make maximum use of both planned and emergent learning. For a further explanation of this model also *see* Megginson and Whitaker (1996).

ACTIVITY 18.2

Consider your development over the past year: do you feel that your strengths are in planning your learning or in learning opportunistically?

Choose your weaker approach, and identify how you could strengthen this.

Learning curves

The idea of the learning curve has been promulgated for some time, and was developed in relation to technical skills development. The general idea was that we tend to learn a new task more rapidly at first, so that the learning curve is steep, and then gradually plateau after we have had significant experience. A slightly different shape of learning is more relevant to personal skills development: the curve is less likely to be smooth, or it may not even be curved. Ideally our learning would be incremental,
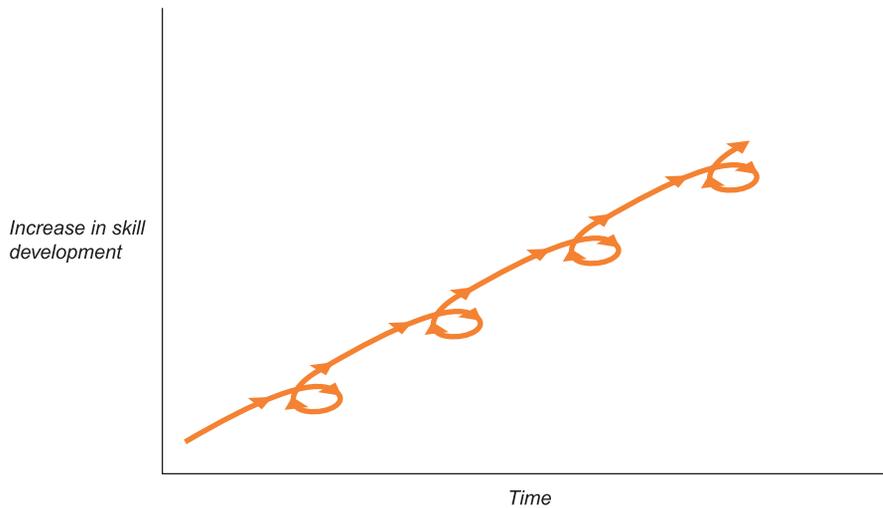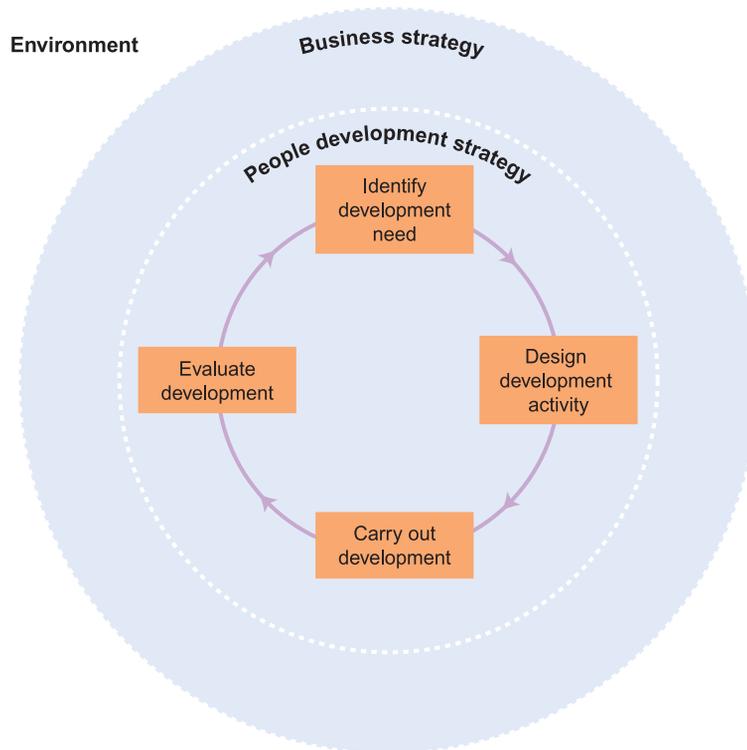
Figure 18.2 The reality of learning progress

improving bit by bit all the time; in reality, however, learning is usually characterised by a mix of improvements and setbacks. Although, with persistence, our skills gradually increase, in the short term we may experience dips. These dips are demotivating but they are a necessary part of learning. Developing personal skills usually requires us to try out a new way of doing things. This is risky because, although the skills we are developing may be quite personal to us, we usually have to experiment with new ways of doing things in public. Understanding that sometimes things get worse before they get better helps to carry us through the dips. Figure 18.2 shows the reality of learning progress.

Identifying learning and training needs

The 'systematic training cycle' was developed to help organisations move away from ad hoc non-evaluated training, and replace it with an orderly sequence of training activities, but this approach has been less prominent of late. Harrison (2002) contests that such a cycle is not necessarily the most appropriate to use as it falls far short of the messy world of practice, and does not focus adequately on learning. Sloman (2001) argues that it may have fitted the 1960s mood for rationality and efficiency, but it is somewhat mechanical and fits less well with our faster pace of continuous change. In spite of this the cycle does retain some value, and we describe an adaptation of such a model to make it more applicable to today's environment. The model is set within an external environment and within an organisation strategy and an HR development strategy. Even if some of these elements are not made explicit, they will exist implicitly. Note that the boundary lines are dotted, not continuous. This indicates that the boundaries are permeable and overlapping. The internal part of the model reflects a systematic approach to learning and to training. Learning needs may be identified by the individual, by the organisation or in partnership, and this applies to each of the following steps in the circle. This dual involvement is probably the biggest change from traditional models where the steps were owned by the

Environment   Business strategy

People development strategy

Identify
development
need

Design
development
activity

Carry out
development

Evaluate
development

Figure 18.3 A systematic model of learning and training

organisation, usually the trainers, and the individual was considered to be the subject of the exercise rather than a participant in it, or the owner of it. The model that we offer does not exclude this approach where appropriate, but is intended to be viewed in a more flexible way. The model is shown in Figure 18.3.

There are various approaches to analysing needs, the two most traditional being a problem-centred approach or matching the individual's competency profile with that for the job that person is filling. The problem-centred approach focuses on any performance problems or difficulties, and explores whether these are due to a lack of skills and, if so, which. The profile comparison approach takes a much broader view and is perhaps most useful when an individual, or group of individuals, are new to a job. This latter approach is also useful because strategic priorities change and new skills are required of employees, as the nature of their job changes, even though they are still officially in the same role with the same job title. When a gap has been identified, by whatever method, the development required needs to be phrased in terms of a learning objective, before the next stage of the cycle, planning and designing the development, can be undertaken. For example, when a gap or need has been identified around team leadership, appropriate learning objectives may be that learners, by the end of the development, will be able 'to ask appropriate questions at the outset of a team activity to ascertain relevant skills and experience, and to check understanding of the task' or 'to review a team activity by involving all members in that review'.

ACTIVITY 18.3

Write learning objectives for the following individuals who are experiencing problems in their performance:

1 Tina, who always dominates meetings, and neglects the contribution of others.

2 Brian, who has never carried out a selection interview before, and is very unsure of how to go about this.

3 Mark, who feels he has lots of contributions to make at meetings, but never actually says anything.

4 Sara, who can never get to meetings on time.

The planning and design of learning will be influenced by the learning objectives and also by the HR development strategy, which for example may contain a vision of who should be involved in training and development activities, and the emphasis on approaches such as self-development and e-learning. Once planning and design have been specified the course, or coaching or e-learning activity, can commence, and should be evaluated at an appropriate time in the future to assess how behaviour and performance have changed.

METHODS OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Off-job methods: education and training courses

Educational courses undertaken during a career are frequently done on a part-time basis leading to a diploma or master's degree with a management or business label, and/or qualification for a professional body. It is considered that such courses provide value for both the employer and the participant – and MBA study is a popular route. For advantages of such a course for the employee *see*, for example, Baruch and Leeming (2001). An alternative approach to qualification is the NVQ route which we discussed in the previous chapter, which is more closely tied to on-job experiences and not concerned with 'education'.

In addition there are consultancy courses. Varying from a half-day to several weeks in length, they are run by consultants or professional bodies for all comers. They have the advantage that they bring together people from varying occupational backgrounds and are not, therefore, as introspective as in-house courses and are popular for topical issues. They are, however, often relatively expensive and superficial, despite their value as sources of industrial folklore, by which we mean the swapping of experiences among course members.

The most valuable courses of this type are those that concentrate on specific skills or knowledge, such as developing time management, interviewing or disciplinary skills, or being introduced to a new national initiative. This short-course approach is probably the only way for individuals to come to terms with some new development, such as a change in legislation, because they need not only to find an interpretation

of the development, but also to share views and reactions with fellow employees to ensure that their own feelings are not idiosyncratic or perverse.

In-house courses are often similar in nature to the consultancy courses, and are sometimes run with the benefit of some external expertise. In-house courses can be particularly useful if the training needs to relate to specific organisational procedures and structures, or if it is geared to encouraging employees to work more effectively together in the organisational environment. The drawbacks of in-house courses are that they suffer from a lack of breadth of content, and there is no possibility of learning from people in other organisations.

Alternatively, there are outdoor-type courses (sometimes known as Outward Bound, after the organisation that pioneered them). Outdoor courses attempt to develop skills involved in working with and through others, and aim to increase self-awareness and self-confidence through a variety of experiences, including outdoor physical challenges. Courses like these continue to be increasingly used, and their differential value is assumed to hinge on their separation from the political, organisational environment. A natural, challenging and different environment is assumed to encourage individuals to forsake political strategising, act as their raw selves and be more open to new ideas. Burleston and Grint (1996), based on ethnographic research into outdoor programmes, found that while most participants did gain from the experience, the idea of providing a de-politicised environment is a naive hope rather than a reality. Ibbetson and Newell (1999) did find, however, that non-competitive outdoor programmes were more effective in meeting teambuilding objectives than competitive programmes. More recently learning experiences based on drama are increasingly being used; in these participants are engaged in improvisation through role play and exercises. For a fascinating insight into the variety of forms this may take *see* Monks *et al.* (2001). There are other forms of simulation in addition to role play, such as games and computer simulations; for a good discussion of definitions and outcomes of such approaches *see* Feinstein *et al*. (2002).

One of the major concerns with these different types of off-job courses and activities is the difficulty of ensuring transfer of learning back to the workplace. As part of their research on the contribution of off-job courses to managers Longenecker and Ariss (2002) asked managers what helped them retain what they had learned and transfer it to the workplace. Developing goals/plans for implementing new skills was most frequently identified. In addition managers said that it helped to review materials immediately after the programme; be actively involved in the learning itself; make a report to peers/superiors on what they had learned; review material and development plans with their mentor/manager; and include development goals in performance reviews. It is generally agreed that a supportive climate helps transfer (for example line manager interest and involvement and development having a high priority in the organisation). Santos and Stewart (2003), for example, found that transfer was more likely if reward such as promotion or pay was attached to developmental behaviour change, and also where there was a helpful management climate in terms of pre- and post-course briefings and activities. In relation to MBAs Martin and Pate (2001) found, surprisingly, that a poor transfer climate did not affect transfer, but willingness to apply what was learned was related to the individual's positive feelings about the company and their intended continuance there.

While courses are no longer viewed as the key means of developing staff, they still have an important role to play, and in Interactive skill 4, in the Focus on skills at the end of Part IV, we therefore explore teaching and instructional skills.

Learning on the job

Manager coaching and teaching

The line manager's role in learning and development has increased with the devolution of HR tasks. Coaching is an informal approach to individual development based on a close relationship between the individual and one other person, usually their immediate manager, who is experienced in the task. The manager as coach helps trainees to develop by giving them the opportunity to perform an increasing range of tasks, and by helping them to learn from their experiences. They work to improve the trainee's performance by asking searching questions, actively listening, discussion, exhortation, encouragement, understanding, counselling and providing information and honest feedback. The coach is usually in a position to create development opportunities for the trainee when this is appropriate. For example, a line manager can delegate attendance at a meeting, or allow a trainee to deputise, where this is appropriate to the individual's development needs. Alternatively they can create the opportunity for a trainee to join a working party or can arrange a brief secondment to another department. Coaches can share 'inside' information with the individual they are coaching to help them understand the political context in which they are working. For example, they are able to explain who will have most influence on a decision that will be made, or future plans for restructuring within a department.

Skilled coaches can adapt their style to suit the individual they are coaching, from highly directive at one end of the scale to non-directive at the other. The needed style may change over time, as the trainee gains more confidence and experience. Useful texts on coaching include MacLennan (1995) who provides considerable detail on the nature of achievement, skills required for coaching, coaching issues, barriers to coaching and how to overcome them. Also, Mumford (1994) has written an excellent guide to the ways that managers can help other managers to learn.

In an exploratory study Carroll and Gillen (2001) found a variety of barriers to line manager acceptance of a teaching/coaching role, in particular lack of interpersonal competence, lack of time, performance pressures, and a feeling that the teaching role was not valued and was the role of the HR department. This same article also provides some excellent material on what makes an effective coach.

There has been an increasing trend to broaden the concept of coaching in terms of both content and who carries out the coaching. Peers and other managers may provide internal coaching, with external executive coaching being provided by consultancy organisations. Various forms of coaching may include career coaching, performance coaching, skills coaching, business coaching and life coaching.

Mentoring

Mentoring offers a wide range of advantages for the development of the protégé, coaching as described above being just one of the possible benefits of the relationship. The mentor would occasionally be the individual's immediate manager, but usually it is a more senior manager in the same or a different function. Kram (1983) identifies two broad functions of mentoring, the first of which is the career function, including those aspects of the relationship that primarily enhance career advancement, such as exposure and visibility and sponsorship. The second is the psychosocial function, which includes those aspects of the relationship that primarily enhance a sense of competence, clarity of identity and effectiveness in the managerial role.

Arnold (1997) found that the most common advantages of mentoring were perceived as role modelling and counselling. There is evidence that mentoring does benefit both parties (*see*, for example, Johnson *et al*. 1999), and Broadbridge (1999) suggests that mentors can gain through recognition from peers, increased job satisfaction, rejuvenation, admiration and self-satisfaction. The drawbacks to mentoring that were revealed in Broadbridge's research include the risk of over-reliance, the danger of picking up bad habits, the fact that the protégé may be alienated from other sources of expertise and the sense of loss experienced when a mentor leaves. In addition, the difficulty of dealing with conflicting views in such an unequal relationship was identified. Perceived benefits, however, considerably outweighed any drawbacks. Megginson (2000) identifies the issue of dysfunctional mentoring, and the danger of assuming that mentoring is unquestionably good.

Managers are also seen as responsible for developing talent, and while a mentor/protégé relationship might not naturally occur, mentorship may be encouraged or formalised. For example, there are systems where all new graduates are attached to a mentor as soon as they join the organisation. The difficulties of establishing a formal programme include the potential mismatch of individuals, unreal expectations on both sides and the time and effort involved. Conway (1998) provides useful advice on planning and implementing a mentoring scheme.

WINDOW ON PRACTICE

Tony Stott and Jenny Sweeney (1999) report on a structured mentoring scheme with a difference at Shell. While Shell runs a very flexible mentoring scheme appropriate for many different types of employee and purposes, it recognises the importance of the design of the scheme and good administration. The authors suggest that there are five critical elements in a good scheme:

- **A database.** Although the scheme is based on natural selection, that is, a mutual decision between a potential mentor and a new recruit, the database appears to be critical, in order to track the flow of mentees and the availability of mentors. Copies of mentor biographies are available for new recruits to read.
- **Mentor support.** Mentors are trained in their role and in recognising the limits of their abilities. There is also a support mechanism for mentors, and mentors meet to share their experiences.
- **Training.** Both mentors and mentees are trained, and this forms a key part of the induction programme for new recruits, with information on reasons for using mentoring, roles and expectations.
- **Resource materials.** These include websites for mentors. Guidance booklets for mentees are also produced.
- **Evaluation.** Shell found that a non-bureaucratic scheme, which gives ownership to the participants, was appreciated.

Source: Summarised from T. Stott and J. Sweeney (1999)
'More than a match', *People Management*, June, pp. 45–8.

Peer relationships

Although mentor–protégé relationships have been shown to be related to high levels of career success, not all developing individuals have access to such a relationship, and even formal schemes are often reserved for specific groups such as new graduate entrants. Supportive peer relationships at work are potentially more widely available to the individual and offer a number of benefits for the development of both parties. The benefits that are available depend on the nature of the peer relationship, and Kram and Isabella (1985) have identified three groups of peer relationships, which are differentiated by their primary development functions. These can be expressed on a continuum from 'information peer', based primarily on information sharing, through 'collegial peer', based on career strategising, giving job-related feedback and friendship, to 'special peer', based on emotional support, personal feedback, friendship and confirmation. Most of us benefit from one or a number of peer relationships at work but often we do not readily appreciate their contribution towards our development. Peer relationships most often develop on an informal basis and provide mutual support. Some organisations, however, formally appoint an existing employee to provide such support to a new member of staff through their first 12–18 months in the organisation. These relationships may, of course, continue beyond the initial period. The name for the appointed employee will vary from organisation to organisation, and sometimes the word 'buddy', 'coach' or 'mentor' is used – which can be confusing! Cromer (1989) discusses the advantages of peer relationships organised on a formal basis and the skills and qualities sought in peer providers, which include accessibility, empathy, organisational experience and proven task skills.

ACTIVITY 18.4

Consider each significant peer relationship that you have at work. Where does each fit on the continuum of relationships described above, and what contributions does it make towards your development?

   If you are in full-time education consider the contribution that each of your relationships (whether at university, home or work) has to your development.

Action learning

Reg Revans was one of the first professors in the UK to specialise in management. Despairing of how management was being taught, Revans resigned his chair in Manchester and moved to Belgium to start his first action learning project based on his conviction that managers do not need education, but the ability to solve problems (Revans 1974). His method has been basically to organise exchanges, so that a manager experienced in one organisation is planted in another to solve a particular set of problems that is proving baffling. He or she brings a difference of experience and a freshness of approach, and is not dependent on new, temporary, organisational peers for career growth. They work on the problem for a period of months, having many

sessions of discussion and debate with a group of other individuals similarly planted in unfamiliar organisations with a knotty problem to solve. The learning stems from the immediate problem that is presented, and from all the others that emerge, one by one, in the steps towards a solution. This presents a need that the student has to satisfy and all the learning is in terms of what they discover they need to know, rather than what someone else feels is necessary. It is an idea of startling simplicity, and has been adapted by both formal educational providers, often in master's courses and by organisations. Paauwe and Williams (2001) note that action learning is less effective when restricted to a single case within a single company, and when participants are all from the same company, and that the problems faced are too routine and familiar. It is therefore unfortunate that this is the way that action learning is often used.

Self-development

Natural learning is learning that takes place on the job and results from an individual's everyday experience of the tasks that they undertake. Natural learning is even more difficult to investigate than coaching, mentoring or peer relationships, and yet the way that we learn from everyday experiences, and our level of awareness of this, is very important for our development. To some extent self-development may be seen as a conscious effort to gain the most from natural learning in a job, and to use the learning cycle as a framework. Self-development can be focused in specific skills development, but often extends to attitude development and personal growth: for example Ireland's North Western Health Board is using an approach to action learning to promote a culture of continuous development (O'Hara *et al.* 2001).

ACTIVITY 18.5

The video *Groundhog Day* can be viewed as a journey of self-development. Watch the video and answer the following questions:

- How did Phil's attitudes change and how was this reflected in his behaviour?
- What do you think Phil learned?
- How did he learn it?
- Why is personal development so difficult?

The emphasis in self-development is that each individual is responsible for, and can plan, their own development, although they may need to seek help when working on some issues. Self-development involves individuals in analysing their strengths, weaknesses and the way that they learn, primarily by means of questionnaires and feedback from others. This analysis may initially begin on a self-development course, or with the help of a facilitator, but would then be continued by the individual back on the job. From this analysis individuals, perhaps with some help at first, plan their development goals and the way that they will achieve them, primarily through

development opportunities within the job. When individuals consciously work on self-development they use the learning cycle in a more conscious way than in natural learning. They are also in a better position to seek appropriate opportunities and help, in their learning, from their manager.

Many of the activities included in self-development are based on observation, collecting further feedback about the way they operate, experimenting with different approaches and in particular reviewing what has happened, why and what they have learned. Self-development, however, is not a quick fix for, as Stansfield (1997) suggests, it requires time, patience, tenacity, adjustment and careful planning. Stansfield (1996) also recommends that more attention needs to be paid to the 'scaffolding' which supports the self-development process. To this end she suggests that extensive briefing and explanation of the theoretical underpinning of the self-development are both important. In addition she suggests direct skill development concerning the role, importance and nature of peer feedback, and further support in tracking personal learning needs to ensure a more rigorous learning journey. Woodall (2000) also notes difficulties around the support structure for self-development, and identifies confusion in terminology as unhelpful. Confusion in terminology is also raised by Antonacopoulou (2000) who highlights a much neglected influence on self-development – that the individuals themselves have to be capable of taking on this responsibility.

Self-development groups

Typically, a group of individuals is involved in a series of meetings where they would jointly discuss their personal development, organisational issues and/or individual work problems. Groups may begin operating with a leader who is a process expert, not a content expert, and who therefore acts as a facilitator rather than, but not to the complete exclusion of, a source of information. The group itself is the primary source of information and may operate without outside help as its members' process skills develop. The content and timings of the meetings can be very flexible, although they will require a significant level of energy and commitment if they are to operate well.

Self-development groups can be devised in a variety of contexts. They can be part of a formal educational course, for example a Diploma in Management Studies, where a group of managers from different organisations come together to support their development; they constitute the whole of a self-development 'course'; or they can be an informal support group within an organisation. However the group originates, it is important that the members understand what every member hopes to get out of the group, the role of the facilitator (if there is one), the processes and rules that the group will operate by and how they agree to interact.

Learning logs

Learning logs are a mechanism for learning retrospectively as they encourage a disciplined approach to learning from opportunistic events. The log may be focused around one particular activity and is usually designed to encourage the writer to explain what happened, how they have reflected on this, what conclusions they have made and what future learning actions they wish to make. Alternatively logs can be used in the form of a daily or weekly diary.

ACTIVITY 18.6

Identify a management skills area that you need to develop. (You may find it particularly helpful to choose an interpersonal area, for example, assertiveness, influencing others, presentation, being more sociable, contributing to meetings, helping others.)

Keep a learning diary over the next few weeks, logging anything that is relevant to your development area. Use the framework which Gwen used in a previous example (*see* Window on practice box at the beginning of this chapter).

At the end of the period review what you have learned in your development area and also what you have learned about the learning cycle.

Learning contracts

There is increasing use of learning contracts, sometimes used within more formalised self-development groups; on other management courses; as part of a mentoring or coaching relationship; or in working towards a competency-based qualification. These contracts are a formal commitment by the learner to work towards a specified learning goal, with an identification of how the goal might be achieved. They thus promote a proactive approach to learning. Boak (1991) has produced a very helpful guide to the use of such contracts and suggests that they should include:

- an overall development goal;
- specific objectives in terms of skills and knowledge;
- activities to be undertaken;
- resources required;
- method of assessment of learning.

The value that individuals gain from learning contracts is dependent on their choosing to participate, their identification of the relevant goal and the importance and value they ascribe to achieving it. Only with commitment will a learning contract be effective, because ultimately it is down to the individual learner manager to make it happen.

WINDOW ON PRACTICE

David wanted to improve his influencing skills and has sent the following draft learning contract to his manager for discussion:

Goal

To improve my influencing skills with both peers and more senior managers.

Specific objectives

- To prepare for influencing situations.
- To try to understand better the perspective of the other.
- To identify the interpersonal skills required – probably active listening, reflecting, summarising, stating my needs, collaboration (but maybe more).
- To be able to identify that I have had more influence in decisions made.

Activities

- Watch a recommended video on influencing skills.
- Re-read my notes from the interpersonal skills course I attended.
- Watch how others in my department go about influencing.
- Ask other people (supportive ones) how they go about it.
- Identify possible influencing situations in advance, and plan for what I want and what might happen.
- Reflect back on what happened, and work out how to do better next time.
- Ask for feedback.

Resources

- Video.
- Notes.
- The support of others.

Assessment

- I could ask for feedback from colleagues and my manager.
- My own assessment may be helpful.
- Make a log over time of decisions made and my originally preferred outcome.

Open, distance and e-learning

As technology enables interesting and interactive presentation of distance learning materials, there is evidence of considerable enthusiasm on the part of organisations to pursue this approach to development, and take advantage of the opportunities it presents. CIPD (2003) reports that one of the most significant changes in training over the last five years is the increased use of e-learning, although it is still most heavily used by IT staff. E-learning can be defined as 'learning that is delivered, enables or mediated by electronic technology' (Sloman and Rolph 2003, p. 1). While e-learning has been characterised as requiring high investment in terms of hardware, software and design time, it has also been characterised as cost-effective in the long run, with the ability to provide speedy and flexible training. Hammond (2001), for example, describes the case of Cisio which is constantly launching new IT-based products. The company has moved from 90 per cent classroom-based training for its sales

representative to 80 per cent online training so that the large numbers of representatives can experience training immediately the product is launched. Channel Four (Cooper 2001) has a strategy to replace much of its classroom teaching activity with interactive learning, and the London Emergency Services are using virtual reality training to prepare employees for emergency events. For example Prickett (1997) reports how Hendon Police Training College uses virtual reality to prepare officers to deal with siege and hostage situations. Sloman and Rolph (2003) found that e-learning has been implemented in a variety of ways, from being introduced as a sweeping ambitious change to small incremental changes to the organisation's approach to training, and from a mandatory change to an offer to volunteers. They also report that key barriers are computer literacy of employees and access to the appropriate equipment.

However enthusiasm from the organisation is not sufficient. Sadler-Smith *et al.* (2000), for example, found that managers did not widely use such distance learning methods, and they were perceived as less effective than other methods. The support provided may well be critical, as may the way that such methods are introduced and used. E-learning covers a wide variety of approaches from using CD-roms to the company intranet and the internet. More sophisticated approaches do not confine e-learning to interactive learning at a distance. Increasingly, synchronous learning is used where all participants log on at the same time, with a tutor or facilitator being available. Individuals can progress through material alone or network with others to complete a task and use chat rooms and have a dialogue with the tutor. Video conferencing can also be used to bring participants together at the same time. For example, some MBAs have been delivered via video conferencing rather than classroom-based teaching, and further details of this are provided in cases 18.1 and 18.2 on the website. The concept of blended learning also has much appeal recently, but this term can be interpreted in different ways. Some use it to indicate the blending of e-learning with face-to-face learning experiences, while others use it more broadly to indicate 'a range of ways that e-learning can be delivered when combined with multiple additional routes that support and facilitate learning' (Sloman and Rolph 2003, p. 6).

WINDOW ON PRACTICE

Hills and Francis (1999), for example, suggest that computer-based learning is a solitary activity, and that social contact and interaction were a necessary ingredient in learning. They assessed the use of their local computer-based training centres in Lloyds TSB, and found that some were used much more than others. The extent of use was not related to geographical accessibility, but instead to the support provided by the centre administrator, before, during and after learning sessions, and also the support of local managers.

EVALUATION OF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

One of the most nebulous and unsatisfactory aspects of the training job is evaluating its effectiveness, yet it is becoming more necessary to demonstrate value for money.

Phelps (2002) argues that training costs UK business £2 billion each year and yet there is no satisfactory return on investment calculation to prove its value, and that we remain unsure whether training breeds success or success breeds training. Evaluation is straightforward when the output of the training is clear to see, such as reducing the number of dispatch errors in a warehouse or increasing someone's typing speed. It is more difficult to evaluate the success of a management training course or a programme of social skills development, but the fact that it is difficult is not enough to prevent it being done.

A familiar method of evaluation is the post-course questionnaire, which course members complete on the final day by answering vague questions that require them to assess aspects of the course using only such general terms as 'good', 'very good' or 'outstanding'. The drawbacks with such questionnaires are, first, that there is a powerful halo effect, as the course will have been, at the very least, a welcome break from routine and there will probably have been some attractive fringe benefits such as staying in a comfortable hotel and enjoying rich food. Second, the questionnaire tends to evaluate the course and not the learning, so that the person attending the course is assessing the quality of the tutors and the visual aids, instead of being directed to examine what has been learned.

Hamblin (1974), in a much-quoted work, identified five levels of evaluation: (1) evaluating the training, as in the post-course questionnaire above; (2) evaluating the learning, in terms of how the trainee now behaves; (3) evaluating changes in job performance; (4) evaluating changes in organisation performance; and (5) evaluating changes in the wider contribution that the organisation now makes. Perhaps the most well-referenced approach to evaluation is Kilpatrick (1959) who suggested four levels of evaluation, somewhat similar to Hamblin: reaction level; learning level (have the learning objectives been met?); behaviour (how has the individual's behaviour changed back in the job?); and results (what is the impact of training on job performance?). Bramley (1996) suggests that performance effectiveness can be measured at individual, team and organisational levels, and that changes in behaviour, knowledge, skills and attitudes need to be considered. He makes the worthwhile point – as do others – that the criteria for evaluation need to be built into development activities from the very beginning, and not tagged on at the end. Bramley is a useful source of practical approaches to evaluation, as is Bee and Bee (1994). Sadler-Smith *et al.* (1999) provides a useful comparison of a wide range of evaluation frameworks.

In 1996 Canning noted that the body of knowledge on evaluation had not grown over the past ten years, and the difficulty of this task is no doubt an influence on lack of progress. Harrison (1997), for example, notes that due to high levels of change, and the gap between espoused and actual HR goals and strategy, it is 'therefore hard, if not impossible, to be certain about the specific outcomes of HR or HRD strategy' (p. 209). There is a need, however, to assess value for money, and this is generally worked out on a pay-back basis, which focuses attention on the short term. Lee (1996) suggests a 'pay-forward' approach to assessing value for money and this concept appears to be more consistent with the nature of training and development strategy and interventions then a pay-back approach, as the outcome may only be observed in the long term.

While organisations may desire a measure of the impact of training on the organisation, in practice this appears to be rarely achieved. Sadler-Smith *et al.*, for example, found in their study (1999) that the reasons for evaluating training were more

often operational than strategic, and they state that evaluation information was used 'mostly for feedback to individuals, and to inform the training process, and less for return on investment decisions' (p. 369).

SUMMARY PROPOSITIONS

18.1 There are four perspectives on learning: behaviourist, cognitive, social and constructivist. Each has different implications for the approach taken to training and development.

18.2 The emphasis has moved from training to learning, with individuals taking ownership of their own learning needs. To be effective learners we need to understand the nature of learning and our own strengths and weaknesses.

18.3 The emphasis on formal development programmes is declining in favour of greater interest in approaches to on-the-job development, such as coaching, mentoring, peer relationships and self-development.

18.4 There has been an upsurge of interest in e-learning. However, the extent to which employees take advantage of such opportunities will be affected by the context and the support available.

18.5 Evaluation of development is critical but difficult. It is most effective when built into the design of the development activity rather than tagged on at the end.

GENERAL DISCUSSION TOPICS

1 If learning is an individual process, why is so much training done in groups? What are the implications of moving towards more individualised learning?

2 Discuss the view that the role of the trainer/facilitator is critically important in the effectiveness of a training programme.

FURTHER READING

Reynolds, J., Caley, L. and Mason, R. (2002) *How do People Learn? A Research report*. London: CIPD
This research report covers the background context to learning in today's organisations and considers the four theoretical perspectives on learning. The report also covers practical aspects of learning and e-learning. This report has been summarised by Jennifer Schramm (2002) in *The change agenda: How do people learn?* London: CIPD.

Thorne, K. (2003) *Blended Learning*. London: Kogan Page
A useful, broadly based handbook which explains how to get the best out of combining innovative and technological advances offered by e-learning with the best of traditional approaches to learning. Thorne considers the high-level support required for such approaches and the involvement of stakeholders as well as providing practical design solutions. A range of case studies shows, in particular, the various ways in which different approaches to learning can be combined.

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An extensive range of additional materials, including multiple choice questions, answers to questions and links to useful websites can be found on the Human Resource Management Companion Website at **www.pearsoned.co.uk/torrington**.