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Learning styles as a tool to effectively support workplace learning in  
multinational organisations

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**ABSTRACT**

The benefits of education are indisputable. After formal education, in our workplace, learning continues. However, perspectives, methodologies and time delivery change from one setting to the other.

Most of the time, in our workplace, know-how is transferred as training. The differences in format are basically its length and its learning objectives. Training in the workplace should be more practical and enhance skills and competencies for the trainees in the workplace.

The goal of this literature review is to find best practices for the trainer in order to deliver effective training in multinational organisations. Because multinational organisations are formed by multicultural teams, the initial suggestion is that the trainer takes into consideration the different approaches to receive knowledge. Differences might arise due to cultural differences or learning styles.

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**KEYWORDS:** Learning styles, culture, workplace learning, training, trainer, trainee, multinational organisations

## 1. INTRODUCTION

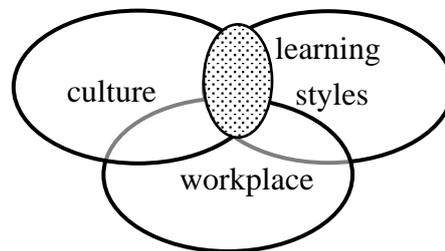
Learning is a lifelong process. Commitment to learn encourages improvements or even to foresee potential pitfalls because of external reasons. Technology and globalization are factors that have been pushing even more the need to learn if we do not want to stay behind. If a new technology or system is introduced into an organisation, in order to be used effectively, employees should receive training in order to upgrade or get new skills (Malone 2015: 69-70). Thus, when organisations adopt learning and training facilitation in their organisational culture, they enhance their competitive advantages (Malone 2015:124).

### 1.1 Reasons for writing a literature review

The literature related to culture and learning styles is extensive as it covers different study fields. Both terms, can be traced, to some extent, even before the 20th century. The literature related to workplace learning, even though it is more recent, is starting to increase. For instance, nowadays there are academic journals dedicated to this topic, namely, The Journal of Workplace learning. The vast amount of information is part of the challenges to review the topics, their backgrounds, their implementation and validated outcomes in their fields.

To critically review the relevant articles published to date, it is necessary to look at interfaces between learning styles, culture and workplace and evaluate the relevance of existing limited researches, which consider the impact of culture in the way we learn.

The intersection between existing researches with respect to culture and learning styles in multinational organisations is graphically demonstrated below:



**Figure 1.** Intersection among key terms

Initial article searches yielded little evidence of published material to date of books or academic articles that interconnect their practicality within a specific context: most of these publications did not consider the benefits of using learning styles to develop and conduct training courses for multicultural groups working in multinational organisations. To overcome this deficit, it becomes necessary to examine the theoretical background to understand or highlight key points of the different research

It is important to notice that in the intersection of the concepts in Figure 1, the focus of the literature review will be in the performers of the process, that is, the person that transfer know-how and the person who receives the know-how, thus, at the practical level. The overview on the theoretical framework within this work is for the purpose to support practice, because, as Wren argues “theory informs practice and practice refines theory.” (2012: 3)

## 1.2 Literature review goals

This literature review examines published evidence-based literature with respect to learning styles, culture and the workplace. The aim is to find resources with practical applications to overcome cultural differences for training delivery within multinational organisations. It considers the depth of available empirical data and theoretical research on investigating cultural factors which may impact the execution of training delivery

designed by human resources or learning and development structures for organisations that are culturally diverse.

It is beyond the scope of this study to examine some of the current topical debates related to either learning styles or culture. These include the constant search for a universally acceptable definition of culture and a finite learning style classification. Also, this literature review considers the findings of several cultural experts. Thus, the discussion of learning styles and culture is by no means exhaustive. Nevertheless, it is comprehensive and includes key concepts, definitions and overviews of recognised authors in the fields. In some cases, the h-index is the tool used to discern relevant authors or publications among the fields of study. The h-index is defined as “a particularly simple and useful way to characterize the scientific output of a researcher.” (Hirsch 2005: 1)

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Learning is a lifelong process and as a learning process the scope of its study is not only related to the education or scientific field. Learning is also a key aspect in the business administration field as learning outcomes impact skills and professional development within organisations. Angel Gurrola, in the foreword of *The Survey of Adult Skills: Reader's Companion* (OECD 2016: 3) states that skills matter for getting access to better-paying jobs and for feeling rewarded for job performances. It can therefore be assumed that to acquire, develop and improve skills are important for both, employee and employer.

Skills can be transferred, learned and improved. They shall be reinforced throughout our lives and put into practice. However, skills acquired during different levels of academic education must be enhanced and, if suitable, specialised in the working place.

As an evidence of the need of research about learning, acquisition and development of skills, the OECD developed the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). This assessment provides information about skills needed at work and in other contexts, namely, personal, societal and communal, educational and training context (OECD 2016: 17–18).

In 2015, the International Labour Office (ILO), a United Nations agency, published its “Compilation of international labour Conventions and Recommendations”. Within the compilation of more than a thousand pages and within the legalistic and normative approach, the Human Resources Development Recommendation, adopted in 2004 by the ILO, recognises the significant contribution of lifelong learning at the individual and group level (2015: 263 – 264). In the Recommendation it is stated that the ILO’s 187 members states should identify human resources development, education and training policies to develop a national qualifications framework and facilitate lifelong learning and employability (ibid: 265). It states that the term lifelong learning “encompasses all learning activities undertaken throughout life for the development of competencies and qualifications” (ibid. 263).

The Recommendation points out that the members shall take into action what it is stated by: “[calling] upon multinational enterprises to provide training for all levels of their employees in home and host countries, to meet the needs of the enterprises and contribute to the development of the country” (ILO 2015: 266). The fact that there are international regulations that within their scope support the need for learning, reinforces the key role of learning and development within an organisation. It also highlights that competencies and skills shall be strengthened and enhanced for successful participation and development within a structure in an organization.

## 2.1 Learning and workplace: workplace learning background

In addition of the intergovernmental organizations, namely ILO and OECD, several authors have researched, explore and discussed the topic of workplace and learning. The SAGE Handbook of Workplace Learning (2011) offers several articles into the topic written by theoreticians, researchers and practitioners. The book is divided into three sections that delve into theme from the contributor’s expertise.

In its introductory article, Cairns and Malloch (2011: 3) state that currently it is a natural progression to discuss the term work place learning under a holistic approach. However, they break apart the concept and debrief about work, place and learning.

Besides going as early as explaining the etymology of the term work, Cairns and Malloch also focus on the individual and society level of work. The authors claim that work at the individual level has a strong relationship with identity. It is common that individuals define themselves by their profession or their work situation, for example, being unemployed or retired. At the societal level, work turns into a measure for economic development. In both cases, work might be linked to success (Cairns & Malloch 2011: 4–5).

They also point out a relationship between the individual and their place, either physical, virtual or even spiritual. In any case, place is important because it is the space where learning occurs (Cairns & Malloch 2011: 8).

When Cairns and Malloch start discussing the term learning, they highlight that “the field described by the term “Learning” has the most definitional and research-based models and theories.” (2011: 8) In addition, they also point out that the perception and the process of learning might change from the East to the West, thus, culture plays a role within its practice.

After Cairns and Malloch deconstruct the term workplace learning, they quote Raelin (2008: 65) to highlight the need to fit a model to achieve outcomes. Evidently, this encompasses the need to “incorporate the theory and the practice modes of learning and explicit and tacit forms of knowledge.” (2011: 12)

In the same anthology, Hager reviews the growing body of theoretical literature about workplace learning from the perspective of its evolution and the expansion of the fields that deal with the topic. Before starting to review authors and theories, the author claims that the first significant shift was to widen the perspective from individuals working in traditional office working places to include organizational and group learning in formal and informal settings (2011: 17). In general, the chapter discusses the topic into a range of psychological, socio-cultural and postmodern theories. Under these three perspectives, the division of workplace learning theories gives a hint of the extensive research in the topic.

As a first outcome, Hager points out that theories in the field of workplace learning were initially influenced by psychological theories. Consequently, the unit of analysis is just the individual; their surroundings are not taken into consideration. Also, the learning process is assumed to be unproblematic or secondary. In addition, social, cultural and organizational elements during the learning process in the workplace are underestimated (2011: 19).

Then, the author reviews workplace learning theories from the socio-cultural perspective. Evidently, the focus integrates individual aspects and contextual factors of learning. However, Hager accurately points out that theories under this field also seek to restate the concept of learning. This makes even more exhaustive to follow a line of research for the learning process (cfr. 2011: 23–24).

Finally, the postmodern theories are reviewed. This analysis is an umbrella category for recent theories. Nevertheless, a pattern that the author observes is that a great number of theories perceive learning as an ongoing process in an everlasting changing environment.

## 2.2 The importance of lifelong learning in multinational organisations

The topic of globalization has been discussed broadly. One of its consequences is the unavoidable need for learning development. According to Malone, due to the globalised fast-paced world, “[...] the concepts and skills needed by employees to do their jobs become obsolete within three to ten years” (2005: 83). Therefore, there is a need for continuous improvement and enhancement to cope with the external changes and surroundings that might also affect the internal organisational life.

Training and development for learning and enhancing skills are not only assets within the culture of an organisation, but also a key competitive advantage in a global market. Marquardt, Berger and Loan (2004: 3–4) note that training and development are the elements that make a difference between global failure or success. However, according to the authors, global organisations must consider a group of factors that might impact the implementation of training and the development of employees. Among these factors culture and learning styles are included as well as the members of the organisations and the trainers in charge to transfer the know-how (ibid. 6).

Consequences of the lack of learning and development is that it might hinder the organisation’s financial or market performance. This highlights the importance for organisations to develop and implement plans to enhance human capital to improve efficiency and productivity, commitment, work quality, among other outcomes (Malone 2005:86-87). If the learning factor is neglected, the negative consequences might be, for instance, low productivity, absenteeism, oversight of safety regulations, and poor quality standards.

### 2.2.1 Lifelong learning: training programmes and location

The Survey of Adult Skills: Reader's Companion (OECD 2016: 104) states that: “The role and importance of formal education and training in the development of individuals’ store of knowledge and skills can hardly be disputed.” This statement is another example of the importance of lifelong learning for individuals, however, in the same statement it is generalized who or where the facilities for lifelong learning shall be provided after formal and compulsory education is fulfilled.

Martinez-Fernandez and Weyman (2013) conducted a study to understand the needs or the development of skill training programmes taken by small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and fulfil lifelong learning outcomes. Even though SMEs might slightly differ from multinational originations, the entities that are within the scope of this work, SMEs can be considered as multinational enterprises. Currently, there are plenty of SMEs that are classified as born globals. Knight (2015: 4) defines born globals as “companies that undertake international business at or near their founding.” Their increase in the last two decades, Knight claims, is due to globalization and sophisticated information and communications technologies. Thus, despite the differences that might be in size between SMEs, which have 500 or less employees (idem.), and multinational organisations, their need and challenges to accomplish and follow lifelong learning could be similar.

The entities that provide training education or activities in SME’s according to Martinez-Fernandez and Weyman (2013: 77) are:

- Universities/colleges
- Private training firms
- Industry organisations/institutes
- Public bodies
- Chambers of Commerce
- Regional organisations

Despite the number of options, the authors point out disadvantages of those entities that hinder the outcome to fulfill lifelong learning purposes.

According to Martinez-Fernandez and Weyman some of the challenges that enterprises face to implement training and development are (2013: 78–80):

- High cost
- Lack of public funding
- Lack of time to participate in training courses
- Courses are too broad or generic
- External training organisations might lack the industry experience
- Universities or colleges might not offer short courses or practical workshops

After the analysis of the need and lack of suitable training options for enterprises, Fernandez and Weyman conclude that “[t]here is a need for formal training organisations and providers to understand the importance of informal training for SMEs and the potential that exist to develop a pathway for informal skills development to be recognized by qualifications.” (2013: 95). This remark encompasses the problems listed beforehand; providers have to understand and deliver training that cover the needs of organisations, however, Fernandez and Weyman do not provide any pattern, methodology, tool or even hints to offer a practical solution.

### 2.2.2 Lifelong learning: Cultural interferences

Actual global organisations value cultural diversity in their structure; as Marquardt et al. point out that “[Global organisations’] ultimate goal is creation of an integrated system with a worldwide approach” (2004: 139). Thus, even when organisational units might have local objectives, they should also integrate global objectives in order to create a unified vision as an organisation.

Cultural diversity within units may bring positive outcomes, like innovation or effective alignment in production, research and development. On the other hand, the lack of cultural awareness can hinder communication and synergies among and within teams and

inhibit their skills and knowledge acquisition or reinforcement, elements needed in talent development. It can therefore be assumed that the ultimate goal of globalisation, that Marquardt et al. state, might be hampered by the culture factor.

If an organisation is looking for enhancing their members skill, in addition of an analysis of an organization needs for learning and development, another important factor to take into account is the cultural perspective of the target audience and their perception and approach to learning. Marquardt et al. (2004: 16) claim that “Diagnosing and understanding learners’ cultural values is as important as understanding their training needs.”

If training providers take into account the different approaches to learn, the know-how transfer might be more efficient and, as a consequence, learning outcomes should be reached more effectively. Jarvis, Griffin, and Holford (2003: 77) maintain that “learning is very closely connected not only to culture, but also to knowledge. What and how we learn are influenced by culture; but culture must be learnt. What counts as knowledge differs between cultural contexts.” Therefore, it is important to consider the culture factor during training development and implementation.

Christopher, Mishra, Medina-López-Portillo, Strickling, Shin & Izenberg (2012: 178) offers a schematic example of the impact of culture on the perception of learning when she refers to differences between Western and Asian methodologies. For instance, she mentions that Asian teaching traditions have a holistic approach, give importance to reflection but also to repetitive learning, there is a formal relationship between teacher and the learners, there are praise and commitment for hard work and self-discipline. However, she also adds that Asians have been learning from the Western teaching methods mainly in sciences, technology and business management. In general “[r]ecognition is given to the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn; between collective and individual teaching methods; and between form and content in learning.” (ibid.) These are general elements in the learning process, however, they are examples of elements that shall be taken into closer consideration for successful training delivery within multicultural audiences.

Awareness of cultural differences within a global organisation have to be taken into account in strategic plans for optimal performance. The role of trainers and learners, the programme design, its learning outcomes, and its actual delivery have to be implemented and adapted taking into consideration the multicultural environment of a global organisation.

### 2.3 Defining Culture

Several theories on the concept of culture have been proposed. Wren (2012) makes an outstanding summary about the concept of culture starting from the 18th century. He also indicates the different disciplines that have studied the concept, namely, philosophy, anthropology, sociology and psychology.

Culture is an abstract concept discussed in academia under different focal points. Some of the most cited authors and their definitions of culture, according to their h-index in Google Scholar, are:

- The collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another. (Hofstede 2001: 9)
- Culture is the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas. (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 2002: 6)
- Culture is a system of attitudes, values, and knowledge that is widely shared within society and transmitted from generation to generation. (Inglehart 1990: 18)

The number of divisions, dimensions, values or other structures of the cultural models differ. However, it is important to note that, according to Hofstede, these structures, dimensions in his case, do not exist: “They are constructs, which have to prove their usefulness by their ability to explain and predict behaviour. The moment they stop doing that we should be prepared to drop them, or trade them for something better” (2002: 5). Thus, these models are just tools of comparison among cultures, they are not structures supporting absolute principles.

Drawing on the extensive range of sources and authors, it is evident that the concept of culture does not only focus on geographical regions; the concept has also been analyzed at a global level. Even though the approach to the concept of culture has different perspectives and key words in their definitions (programming of the mind; problems and dilemma; attitudes, values, and knowledge), a common point is that the authors identify divisions within their theoretical development of the concept of culture. The sum of these divisions equals, according to their cultural studies, a country's national culture.

Despite its multiple frameworks and diverse research instruments, the literature on culture conveys towards the same concept: national culture. The agreement that there is a national culture embedded by each country seems to be a common denouement among the authors dealing with cultural differences. This work will focus on the resources dealing with those cultural differences and their impact associated with multicultural groups working in multinational organisations.

### 2.3.1 Nations and cultures: Criticism

McSweeney opens his most cited work with the following question: "Do nations have cultures?" (2002: 89) His criticism to Hofstede's theoretical framework claims that the lack of reliability in the research sample (IBM's employees) created data based on unwarranted assumptions. As a consequence of this analysis, McSweeney claims that Hofstede developed typologies or models of cultural differences based on inaccurate empirical descriptions. McSweeney argues that "[t]o assume national uniformity, as Hofstede does, is not appropriate for a study which purports to have found it." (2002: 100)

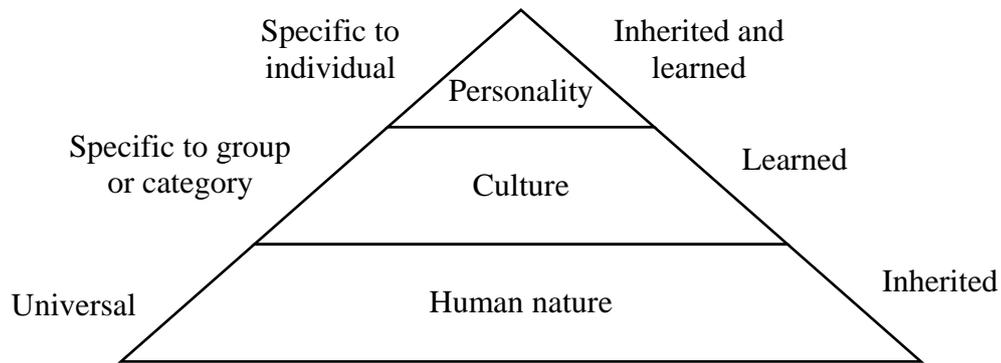
On the other hand, Minkov (2013: 214–216) acknowledges that within academia and the business world Hofstede's dimension have had an impact because the model is scientifically derived but its use is easy to grasp and apply for practitioners. Thus, the Hofstede's model of national culture is a tool that serves to reduce the complexities of the

diverse definition and application of culture to relatable concepts, this allows practical comparison of the differences between national cultures through a common language.

A general criticism about cultural models is that they can convey national stereotypes. Minkov argues that “the defining feature of a stereotype is its operationalization as a general statement about a complex entity, such a nation or a society” (2013: 48). This definition conveys the practical use of stereotypes for research instruments. Minkov debriefs about the different lines of research that have included stereotypes in order to get data, for example, the Project GLOBE that he describes as “the largest cross cultural study of stereotypes to date” (ibid.). However, it is important to highlight that stereotypes are not statements that are based on false or bias statements, they can be validated through research if, Minkov claims, “they describe some salient practices or strong taboos in a particular society, especially if there is a high level of agreement among the respondents.” (ibid. 50)

### 2.3.2 Culture and personality

It is usually claimed that because every person has its own personality, nations cannot be considered homogenous entities. This criticism rests on the statement that personality and culture are the same. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010: 6–7) explain that personality is our unique set of traits that are partly inherited by our genes and partly learned in our surroundings, our culture. On the other hand, culture is not inherited, it is just learned. What is common to all societies is human nature that represents our basic biological and psychological functioning. The summary and evident difference among these concepts were represented by Hofstede & et al. in their following Figure 2:



**Figure 2.** Three levels of Uniqueness in Mental Programming (Hofstede et al. 2010: 6)

Our personality might shift throughout our lifetime. However, it is important to reinforce that personality concerns the individual, whereas culture concerns to groups.

#### 2.4 Learning Styles

In their analysis of factors impacting human resource development in multinational organisations, Marquardt et al. (2004: 6) take into account the role of learning styles because “In many cases, trainees possess different learning styles from that of their trainers. One’s learning style is based on one’s education system at the formal and nonformal levels as well as a variety of cultural influences on learning.” One size does not fit all: learning and its cognitive process is not a universal process. This supports the importance of assessing learning styles within the workplace and, therefore, its notable role in the process of lifelong learning.

Cassidy defines learning styles as “The preferred way in which an individual approaches a task or learning situation” (2004: 421). The definition is quite straight forward, however, when the individual approach is deconstructed, the concept “learning styles” becomes more complex than just giving a definitive statement of the term. It is more appropriate to analyze key characteristics attributed to such aim. This entails a review of what they

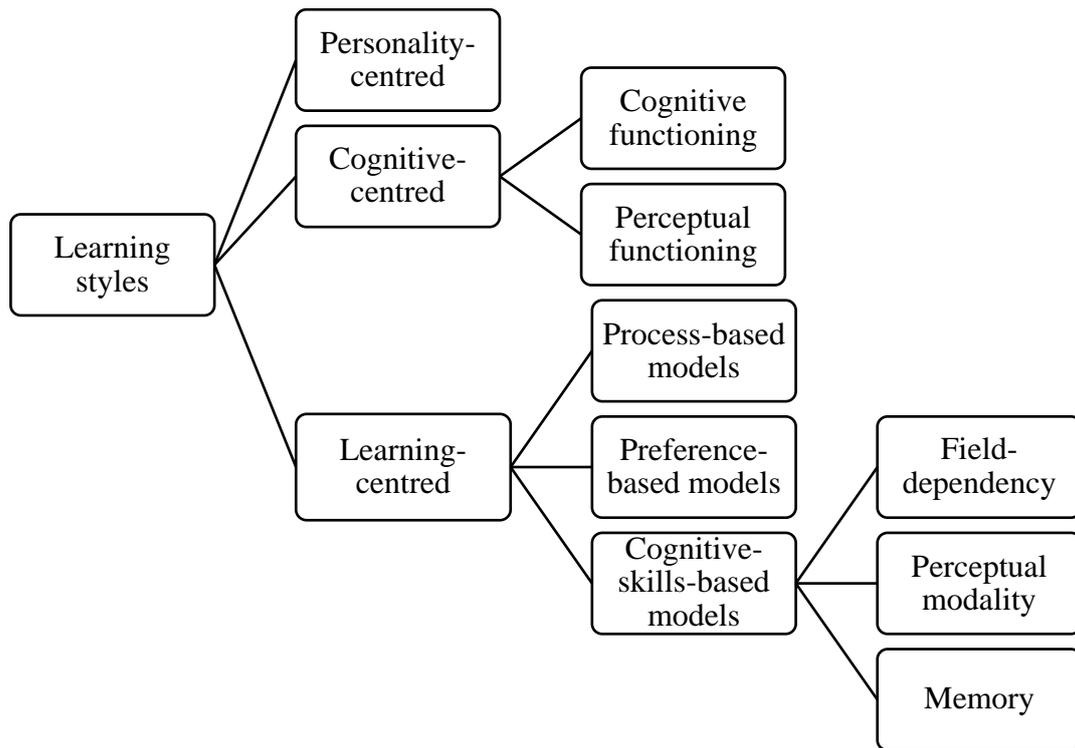
are in terms of instructional preference, social interaction, and cognitive process, among other characteristics (see Cassidy 2004: 422).

Before starting the review about learning styles, it is important to define cognition as this term and other related concepts to its meaning are commonly used through the analysis. Tuleja, within the theoretical and the practical semantics of the word, defines cognition as: “how we reason and perceive. It is the way we process information, react to it, and create our own meaning from that information.” (2017: 227)

In this section, I will follow up the most significant theories that Cassidy overviews in his inventory of learning styles (2004). The first reviewed authors are Riding and Cheema who, Cassidy claims, propose a broad categorization of learning style: wholistic-analytic and verbalizer-imager. The wholistic-analytic dimension represents the cognitive process that individuals use to process information, as a whole or into different parts. The verbalizer-imager describe the preference of an individual for words or images (2004: 423).

The simplicity of this model can easily be adapted to the workplace environment. Thus, in case an organization request short time training course, as it was mentioned in the example related to SME's, trainers can design a course with material covering both learning styles' categories. As a consequence, going through the learning objectives and achieving learning goals might be more effective. Nevertheless, Riding and Cheema (quoted in Cassidy 2004: 423) draw attention themselves that the learning styles identified have not been based upon empirical studies, a disadvantage in the reliability to use this model.

Rayner and Riding (quoted in Cassidy 2004: 423) categorise learning styles within the following framework:



**Figure 3.** Learning styles approaches

Personality-centred models are bound to personality approaches. In the learning styles theory, these type of models are only linked to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator instrument which describes and identifies “16 distinctive personality types that result from the interactions among the preferences.” (The Myers-Briggs Foundation 2018)

Cognitive-centred models focus on the difference of cognitive styles. Some approaches in these models integrated the wholistic-analytic dimension (cognitive functioning) and the verbalizer-imager dimension (perceptual functioning). Learning-centred models examine the learning process and its style and development of learning acquisition since its first stages. Process-based models focus on perception and information process. Preference-based models focus on learning preferred settings, namely light, temperature, group or individual study. Cognitive skills-based approaches apply cognitive-centred models within specific learning environment, that is, this approach depends on the field of study or practice, our perception and the senses involved, and memory (Cassidy 2004: 424).

According to Cassidy, when learning styles within a group are taken into consideration by adapting training delivery and selecting material, the learning outcomes are positive and learning performance and enhancement of skills has positive results (2004: 438–439). Consistent with Cassidy's observations, Felder and Spurlin claim that after assessing learning styles from a group, training delivery can be designed taking into consideration the learning needs of the group that is receiving instruction (2005: 110). Nevertheless, they also point out that identifying learning styles does not mean to label individuals and follow blindly the recommended methodology for each case. Actually, they recommend to include material or dynamics, up to a certain point, that includes other learning styles so participants can exercise skills using different cognitive processes (ibid. 105).

Because of the practical nature of learning styles, Felder and Spurlin note misuses when they are applied in practice. For instance, they highlight that learning styles mark preferred tendencies, they are not predictor of behavior. In addition, they point out that participants learning process strength or weakness cannot be measured, that is, the fact that a learner prefers analytical thinking over wholistic does not equal that the learner will have excellent numeracy skills (2005: 104-105).

Cassidy's article (2004) is a roadmap complemented with theoretical information about the models and their tools or assessments related to learning styles. The article is a tool itself to have an overview to support introduction, knowledge or awareness into the topic. His review helps to identify similarities and differences among the theories and their instruments. Following this debrief, we can identify the questionnaires, instruments or methodologies more suitable for the workplace context. However, plenty of the measurement tools were only applied to students. Further experimental investigations are needed to estimate the use of many questionnaires applied in the workplace environment.

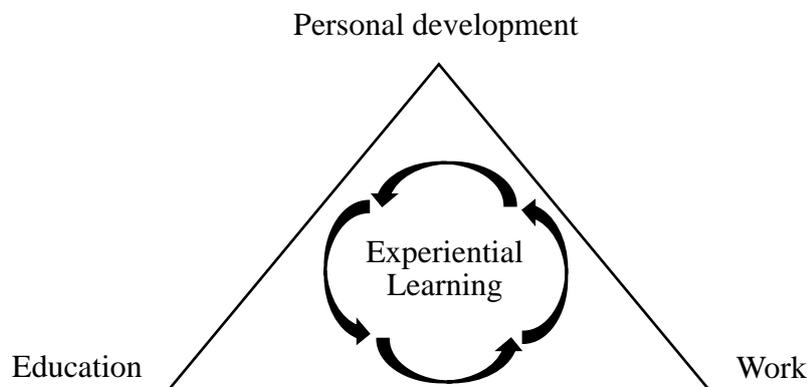
#### 2.4.1 Experiential learning

Kolb highlights the need to learn in a globalized world because:

[t]he emerging “global village”, where events in places we have barely heard of quickly disrupt our daily lives, the dizzying rate of change, and the exponential growth of knowledge all generate nearly overwhelming needs to learn just to survive. [...] For individuals and organizations alike, learning to adapt to new “rules of the game” is becoming as critical as performing well under the old rules. (1984: 2)

Kolb’s Experiential Learning Styles (ELS) is a suitable tool to be used in the workplace because it relies on its own self-explanatory name, it is based on experience. Cassidy’s classification of learning styles (2004), Kolb’s model is categorized within the process models.

Workplace environment requires that skills and competences are enhanced or developed to achieve good performance and innovation (OECD 2010, 2012, 2016). The more we apply our knowledge, the more we gain. The relationship between learning and skills development is represented in Figure 3:



**Figure 4.** Experiential Learning as the Process that Links Education, Work, and Personal Development (Kolb 1984: 4)

The outcome of this process is knowledge (Kolb 1984: 41). Kolb states that overtime individuals develop learning styles as a consequence of our hereditary equipment, our life experience and our environment (ibid. 76). These elements affect our learning skills and our preferences of instruction methodology over others. For instance, within our environment, the social experiences with our family, our professional activities or the

interaction with the members of our workplace affect our problem solving skills: “we come to resolve the conflicts between being active and reflective and between being immediate and analytical in characteristic ways” (ibid. 77). According to Kolb’s theory, the choice to solve a problem follows a cognitive process, but this process is also influenced by our personal background. Following this statement, we can see the connection between culture and learning styles, as culture is part of our personal background.

Kolb’s experiential learning inventory is summarized in Table 1:

**Table 1.** Kolb’s Experiential Learning Styles Inventory (Kolb 1984: 77–78)

Learning Style	Description	Strength	Characteristics Displayed
Convergent	It relies on abstract conceptualization (AC) and active experimentation (AE)	Problem solving, decision making, and the practical application of the ideas	Knowledge is organized in hypothetical-deductive reasoning
Divergent	It emphasises concrete experience (CE) and reflective observation (RO)	Imaginative ability and awareness of meaning and values	Individuals perform better in situations that call for generation of alternative ideas
Assimilation	The dominant learning activities are abstract conceptualization (AC) and reflective observation (RO)	Inductive reasoning and the ability to create theoretical models, in assimilating disparate observations into an integrated explanation	Individuals are less focus on people and more concerned with ideas and abstract concepts
Accommodative	It emphasises concrete experience (CE) and active experimentation (AE)	Things and plans get done. Involvement in new experiences	Individuals adapt themselves to changing immediate circumstances

In his initial chapter, Kolb (1984) examines other disciplines that are fundamental to experiential learning. He follows Dewey and his educational philosophy, Lewin in the field of social psychology and Jean Piaget and his work on genetic epistemology, among others. However, he does not delve into the influence of culture in learning styles until his article published in 2009.

#### 2.4.2 Learning styles and cultural differences

Joy and Kolb (2009) review Yamazaki's (2005) meta-analysis of different studies that use the Experiential Learning Styles model that aim to find evidence that culture influences learning styles. Overall, the sample of these studies include managers, teachers, students and accounting students. Joy and Kolb acknowledge these studies provide empirical evidence. However, they note that they are just a guideline to start the discussion about the relationship between culture and learning styles (2009: 72). The authors note that in previous studies (Kolb & Kolb 2005) factors like gender, age, level of education, area of specialization and workplace (Cairns & Malloch 2011; OECD 2016) might also affect an individual's learning style (ibid. 73).

Even though Joy and Kolb recognize Yamazaki's extensive analysis, it is important to mention that Yamazaki also assesses cultural differences in his meta-analysis using elements from different fields, for instance, from organisational and national culture. Hofstede draws fine distinctions between both concepts. He claims that:

The difference between national and organizational cultures is based on their different mix of values and practices [...]. *National cultures* are part of the mental software we acquired during the first ten years of our lives, in the family, in the living environment, and in school, and they contain most or our basic values. *Organizational cultures* are acquired when we enter a work organization as young or not-so-young adults, with our values firmly in place, and they consist mainly of the organization's practices—they are more superficial (2010: 346)

Therefore, practices might change according to our environment, values cannot. This supports Kolb's observation that academic and professional specialization have a strong

influence on our learning style, thus, our learning style might change according to our environment or learning space, as Kolb and Kolb observe ( 2005: 199–201).

In order to assess the impact of culture and its influence on the leaning process, Joy and Kolb follow the Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness (GLOBE) project’s dimensions. GLOBE’s definition of culture is: “Shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives that are transmitted across generations.” The GLOBE’s dimensions are defined in Appendix 1.

The sample included 533 individuals that covered the GLOBE’s society clusters. Their hypothesis and findings are summarized in Table 2:

**Table 2.** GLOBE’s dimensions and Joy and Kolb’s hypotheses and results (2009: 73–83)

GLOBE’s dimension	Joy and Kolb’s hypothesis	Results
	H1. Members of different cultures will significantly <b>differ</b> in their preference for abstract conceptualization over concrete experience ( <b>AC-CE</b> ) in order to grasp an experience while learning	Supported
	H2. Members of different cultures will significantly <b>differ</b> in their preference for active experimentation over reflective observation ( <b>AE-RO</b> ) in order to transform an experience while learning	Partially supported
In-group collectivism	H3. The higher the in-group collectivism in a culture is, the more will be <b>reliance</b> of its members on concrete experience ( <b>CE</b> ) over abstract conceptualization ( <b>AC</b> ) in order to grasp an experience while learning	Partially supported
In-group collectivism	H4. The higher the in-group collectivism in a culture is, the more will be reliance of its members on reflective observation ( <b>RO</b> ) over active experimentation ( <b>AE</b> ) in order to transform an experience while learning	Not supported
Institutional collectivism	H5. The higher the institutional collectivism in a culture is, the more will be the <b>reliance</b> of its	Partially supported

	members on abstract conceptualization ( <b>AC</b> ) over concrete experience (CE) in order to grasp an experience while learning	
Uncertainty avoidance	H6. The higher the uncertainty avoidance in a culture is, the more will be the <b>reliance</b> of its members on abstract conceptualization ( <b>AC</b> ) over concrete experience (CE) in order to grasp an experience while learning	Supported
Uncertainty avoidance	H7. The higher the uncertainty avoidance in a culture is, the more will be the <b>reliance</b> of its members on reflective observation ( <b>RO</b> ) over active experimentation (AE) in order to transform an experience while learning	Supported
Future orientation	H8. The higher the future orientation in a culture is, the more will be the <b>reliance</b> of its members on abstract conceptualization ( <b>AC</b> ) over concrete experience (CE) in order to grasp an experience while learning	Supported
Future orientation	H9. The higher the future orientation in a culture is, the more will be the reliance of its members on active experimentation (AE) over reflective observation (RO) in order to transform an experience while learning	Not supported
Performance orientation	H10. The higher the performance orientation in a culture is, the more will be the reliance of its members on active experimentation (AE) over reflective observation (RO) in order to transform an experience while learning	Not supported
Assertiveness	H 11. The higher the assertiveness orientation in a culture is, the more will be the reliance of its members on active experimentation (AE) over reflective observation (RO) in order to transform an experience while learning	Not supported
Power distance	H12. The higher the power distance in a culture is, the more will be the reliance of its members on reflective observation (RO) over active experimentation (AE) in order to transform an experience while learning	Not supported
Gender egalitarianism	H 13. The higher the gender egalitarianism in a culture is, the more will be the <b>reliance</b> of its members on abstract conceptualization ( <b>AC</b> ) over concrete experience (CE) in order to grasp an experience while learning	Supported (but it needs replica)
Humane orientation	H14. The higher the humane orientation in a culture is, the more will be the reliance of its members on concrete experience (CE) over	Not supported

	abstract conceptualization (AC) in order to grasp an experience while learning	
Humane orientation	H15. The higher the humane orientation in a culture is, the more will be the reliance of its members on reflective observation (RO) over active experimentation (AE) in order to transform an experience while learning	Not supported

After this results, Joy and Kolb draw on more specific observations. They note that culture has an impact on learning styles, but it has a more significant effect in an individual's preference for abstract conceptualization over concrete experience. Among the other demographic variables, education and area of specialization have the largest impact on developing a learning style (2009: 83).

Despite the significant findings assess by Joy and Kolb, it is important to remember that their findings should not be taken into absolutist classifications. As Minkov (2013) and Hofstede claim (2001; 2002) when categorizations, models or dimensions are researched and validated, their use and applicability is not unequivocal. They shall be used as a tool to have an easier understanding of our globalized world.

#### 2.4.3 Criticism to learning styles

As it was pointed out in the introduction of this work, learning styles is proposed as tool to seek for positive results in learning and developing competencies in the work place. However, there are some authors that disqualify learning styles as a tool to be considered for training development and transfer of the know-how.

The range of criticism goes from the inaccurate theoretical framework (Ann and Carr 2017) to the usual pigeon-holing complain (Kirschner 2017) when authors develop models. It is somewhat surprising that the first argument against the learning styles theoretical frameworks does not note the similarities among the authors and schools of thought that the authors follow in order to develop their frameworks.

The argument against stereotyping or pigeon-holing, that Kirschner states (2017: 167), was already forestalled by Kolb and Kolb when, quoting one of Kolb's previous articles (1981: 290–291), observe:

When used in the simple, straightforward, and open way intended, the LSI usually provides an interesting self-examination and discussion that recognizes uniqueness [...]. The danger lies in the reification of learning styles into fixed traits, such that learning styles become stereotypes used to pigeonhole individuals and their behavior.

Kolb's theory is based in experience and part of its theoretical framework follows what is known as the philosophy of pragmatism. In connection to this philosophical approach, Minkov reminds us that: "in the context of research methodology a pragmatic perspective proposes that research methods and designs should be judged on the basis of what they can accomplish." (2013: 81) A clear example of this statement is shown in Table 2. From the 15 hypotheses stated by Joy and Kolb (2009), not all of them were true. However, practitioners and trainers can approach to their true hypotheses and take them into consideration when designing training material for multicultural groups.

## 2.5 Queries from practice to theory

Reese (2018: 353) states that research about learning organizations has been in the field since the 1980s. The OECD (2010: 09) defines the term learning organisation as "an organisation that promotes management tools concerned with the improvement of the individual and organisational learning." Hence, the link between lifelong learning and workplace is evident; learning in the working place is an unavoidable step into the development of a learning organization.

As it is stated in the OECD's definition, to reach achievement in a learning organisation, tools have been developed; however, in the same publication, it is stated that most of this tools are "weakly linked to an empirical research programme designed to observe and measure the extent to which existing firms display the characteristics of learning

organisations.” (OECD 2010: 20) The comparison of these statements mark the gap between theory and practice.

Tools might give the answer to the question *what* to provide data and assess an overall performance; however, within a learning organisation, tools shall not be just recorders of information about their members and their practices. In order to provide practical information, tools shall also provide answers to the question *how*. For instance, if how questions, preferences statements and scaling responses are included in pre-training and feedback surveys, practitioners and/or trainers can get data of preferred actions to be implemented over another. Asking the right questions and acting on the answers will provide meaningful data to take into practice. In this way skills and competences in the workplace could be enhance and, as a consequence, the achievement of learning outcomes from the members of their organisation.

In addition of tool selection, trainers and/or practitioners have to bear in mind that time can be a restriction. Tauber and Wang-Audia (2014: 4) observe that our hyper connected world and the stress of information overload leave little time to workplace learning. These results accord with Martinez-Fernandez and Weyman (2013) research in SMEs; organisation members do not have and do not prioritize time for workplace learning.

Learning styles and the concept of cultural dimension as a tool of comparison among countries may be of assistance to develop practical methodology and effective learning outcomes during training delivery in the workplace. As it has been developed in previous sections, both fields have developed theoretical frameworks and have been used in several studies as methodologies. On the other hand, the amount of theory and the significant number of case studies can also be a challenge to find a suitable framework. Thus, this literature review attempts to find best practices by exploring and debriefing published papers in academic journals.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 3.1 Database in Helka Libraries

An initial examination was guided by using the keywords associated with the proposed thesis (the learning employee in **multinational organisations**: an overview of **learning styles** to overcome **cultural differences** during training delivery). The initial search focused on materials available through Helka libraries' collections webpage. The results of the search in the library's collection did not yield any results. However, it yielded more than 5 000 results in the Article Search. Nevertheless, these results were not taken into further consideration because the database is run by Ex Libris Group, an integrated library system (ILS). This ILS includes articles that might not be available through the collections of Helka libraries as it is pointed out in the library website itself. In addition, the results do not show any bibliometric method for research impact.

Nevertheless, one advantage of the Article Search is that it displays a graph that shows the number of published items in each year. The graph displayed after the results of the key words traces articles related to the theme of this research before 1964. The number of articles rises from 1964 onwards. In addition, the graph also displays that by far the greatest number of articles were published in 2010. After these outcomes, new search rules were created to find resources available in the library's collection.

#### 3.2 Search Terms

In the library's collection search field, the key words (learning styles) + (culture) were used. This search yielded book material (including eBooks) and Thesis (Pro gradu thesis). Through skimming through the sources, it became evident that a significant volume of this data is irrelevant to the specific focus of this work. Accordingly, a filtration process was adopted by using the previous key words in combination with (workplace). This keyword was included in order to retrieve sources that deal with organisations competing in the global market place. The search used the NOT operator to exclude (higher

education) or (children) as key words. These keywords were not included as they appear in different research disciplines that are not connected to develop or enhance skills, train workforce or transfer know-how to employees within a multinational organisation.

The subsequent search focuses on materials available through on-line sources, namely citation analysis databases and academic databases. The search and the selection of databases followed the recommendations from Helsinki University (2018).

### 3.3 Citation analysis databases

This literature review considered peer reviewed journals and published works and excluded non-peer reviewed publications, book reviews or conference papers. The timespan before filters is from 1991-2018, because this are the years that Helka's Library Collection has resources. After the search was narrowed down, the timespan was from 2003–2018. To keep consistency, this year range was used accordingly in the citation analysis databases and the academic databases.

Helsinki University Library (2018) points out that Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar are the three best recognised citation analysis databases. The website also notes that:

Google Scholar's strength is the broad scope of content for both types of publications and disciplines. There is also a better international and multi-lingual coverage than in Wos [sic] or Scopus. However, only a small portion of all published scholarly literature is included. Because there is no complete list of sources indexed on Google Scholar, there is no way to know how comprehensive your searches are or how much information is available.

To overcome the expansive amount of results that might include not reliable sources, the website recommends drawing data using the tool Publish or Perish. This tool is defined in its website as a “software program that retrieves and analyzes academic citation” (Harzing: 2007). For the purposes of this work, the fields used in the tool were “All of the words”, “Any of the words”, “None of the words”. A major advantage of this tool is that when it retrieves the results, it also displays citation metrics. Thus, despite the amount

of results displayed in the interface of the tool, the h-index, for instance, provides the number of citations of the papers. This measurement helps to filter the articles based on their impact in the research area.

The following academic data bases were searched for relevant publications as indicated below:

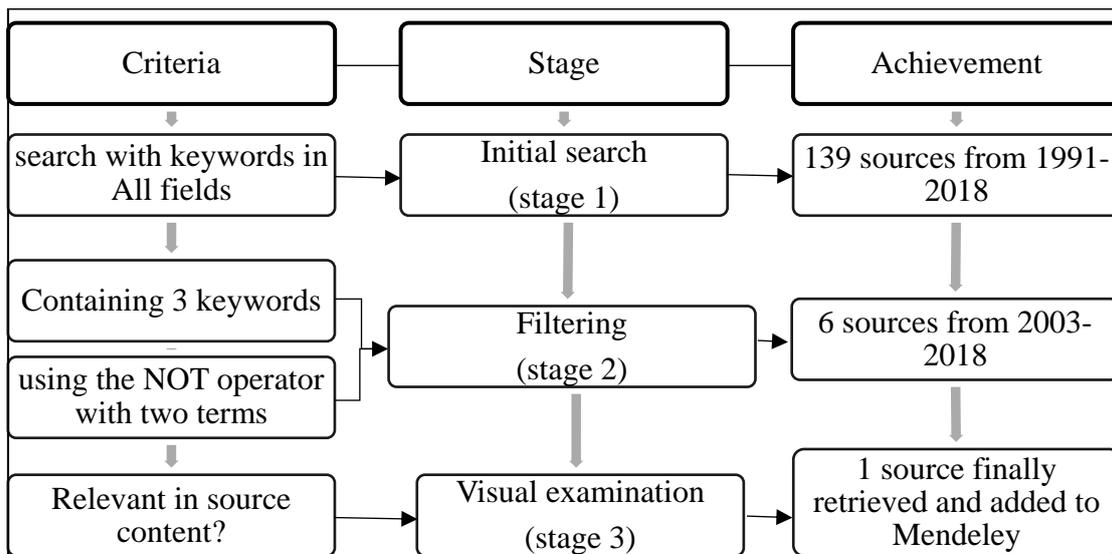
**Table 3.** Internet research for literature review sources

Database	Found	Filtered
Helka libraries' collections	139	6
scholar.google.com	Results' limit was reached with the software Publish or Perish (<1000)	154
Scopus	912	12
Web of Science	576	3
ERIC: Educational Resource Information Center	712	0
Microsoft Academic	104	0
Elsevier science direct	3090	27
Directory of Open Access Journals	80	0
Proquest	9908	147
Emerald Insight	644	66
	Total	415

The filtered search yielded a total of 415 peer approved articles or books. Through skimming through the items mentioned, it became evident that a significant volume of this data is irrelevant to the specific focus of this research. More filters like language or subject were used when available.

The less relevant papers were further filtered out if the articles did not have some of the keywords in the title or abstract. The second stage involved a critical review of the

abstract and contents pages of the documents, again filtering out irrelevant items. This left a total of only 14 publications for further analysis. The final stage of the review involves seeking each relevant article through download and adding it a personal electronic library data base utilizing Mendeley for all information associated with the current work. The refinement process is detailed in Figure 4:



**Figure 5.** Keywords learning styles + culture. Source: <https://helka.finna.fi/?lng=en-gb>

After reviewing the articles retrieved with the aforementioned key words, it became apparent that several articles also have the key word “learning organisation” or the topic is mentioned or referred as the articles develop. This term and its scope of research and application is not equivalent to learning in the workplace. As it has been mentioned in the previous section, a learning organisation is the full perspective and an end goal of an organisation. Learning in the workplace is just part of the process needed to achieve a successful learning organisation.

#### 4. ARTICLES IN PEER REVIEW JOURNALS

It is important to point out that after the examination in the databases, a significant number of articles were mainly retrieved from the Journal of Workplace Learning. According to the information from Scopus Journal Metrics (2018) there are 164 issues online of the journal. The Scopus' CiteScore rank shows that in 2017 this journal ranked 73/204 in the category of Development and it ranked number 76/173 in the category Behavior and Human Resource Management, hence, its significance in the field. It could be argued that the positive results were also because the words workplace and learning are in the title of the journal, however, it is somewhat surprising that after the search in the databases using the AND and NOT operators, there were no articles from this journal that included the three key words.

Below a table that includes the 14 articles yielded in the search. They are divided into the first and second level's headings of the section:

**Table 4.** Articles retrieved with key words in databases

Heading of subsection	Article
2.4.2 Experiential learning and cultural differences	Are There Cultural Differences in Learning Style?
4.1 Supporting workplace learning	Workplace learning and learning theory
	What does "learning organization" mean?
4.1.1 Workplace and learning: synergy or separation?	The savvy learner
4.1.2 Additional resources for workplace learning: Informal learning	A review of informal learning literature, theory and implications for practice in developing global professional competence
	Learning in the workplace – an instrument for competence assessment
4.2 Research approaches to assess workplace learning and their groups	Comparing managers' and non-managers' learning and competencies
4.2.1 Research approaches outside the workplace to upgrade professional development	The assessment of formal management development: A method, a baseline and the need to incorporate learning styles
	Do trainer style and learner orientation predict training outcomes?

4.2.2 Research approaches outside the workplace to enhance intercultural skills	A proposed methodology for identifying multicultural skills in heterogeneous groups
4.2.3 Learning spaces: college or workplace learning	Reconceptualising the relations between college-based and workplace learning
4.3 Tools for learning organisations	A view of the learning organization from a practical perspective: interview with Michael Marquardt
	Training culture
	Learning in the workplace – an instrument for competence assessment

#### 4.1 Supporting workplace learning

The common opening statement for academic articles discussing workplace learning is the call to awareness to the vast amount of research. As a consequence, authors do not even emphasize the amount of research on learning theories and their methodologies even though they always referred to them.

Acknowledging the extensive theoretical setting of workplace learning, Illeris raises some questions: “What is tenable and what is just words? What options are suitable and in what contexts? Can one really be sure of achieving everything that’s is offered?” (2003: 168). As reasonable approach to tackle these issues Illeris urges the need of tools that can bridge workplace learning and educational learning. To answer the questions raised and the need for tools, Illaries explores further options by stating a change of theoretical perspective “to the learner as a human being in general, as a member of the present late modern globalised market and risk society, and as a specific individual with a personal life history, situation and future perspective.” (idem. 169)

Illeris’ remark of the learner as an individual is clearly supported by Jarvis (2010) work which first edition was published in 1983. His concern about competency developments has currently been address with quantitative methods by the OECD’s Survey of Adult Skills (2016) that was conducted in over 40 countries. Nowadays, after the boom and extensive research on e-learning platforms, there are more resources or tools available to

bridge learning and the workplace in a virtual way, however, paradoxically, more research needs to be done in the traditional face to face training delivery, its delivery methodology, guidelines and best practices according to a need analysis of the target audience, the individuals that integrate the learning group, an item that Illeris did not consider.

In contrast with Illeris and his focus on the learners' perspective, Örtenblad (2018) addresses the need to reflect on the organisations and their standing as learning organisations. He claims that further guidelines of the learning organisation definition need to be set and demarcated in order to standardise clear features that shall be fulfilled by any learning organisation that claims to be one. In addition, Örtenblad's aim is also to clearly state what a learning organisation shall not be, thus self-proclaimed learning organisation can be disassociated from actual ones. When the distinction is made, there will be room for suitable action and improvement for each case.

In order to find a definition that includes the comprehensive characteristics that every learning organisation should embedded, Örtenblad (2018: 151) approaches the concept from three perspectives in order to break it down from the semantic, pragmatic and conceptual attributes of the term (cfr. Cairns & Malloch 2011; Marquardt et al. 2004; OECD 2010).

The sources that Örtenblad traces back are from disciplines like educational sciences or management studies, for instance he references examples from educational systems, namely Hofstetter (1967), and organisational psychology, like Kolb et al. (1971). These resources support Örtenblad note that his paper is conceptual and that it belongs to a series of articles that aim to create a contingent model that can frame accurately a learning organisation. Weather the outcomes of the expected contingent model would fit any size and type of organisation it is not sated. Also it is not clear if the model would cover the general and specific objectives of the organisation, trainer, groups and/or employee-learner.

#### 4.1.1 Workplace and learning: synergy or separation?

Illeris and Örtenblad seem to create a dichotomy in the approach to workplace learning and their entities, shall we approach workplace learning from the learner's standpoint or from the organisational perspective? Dealtry (2004: 107), reflecting on the importance of learning in the work place, actually asks the question "Who profits from learning". The author observes that if an organisation and its members reply to this question, their interest might converge or diverge. The crucial factor to get value for all the stakeholders involved in workplace learning, the author claims, is learning to learn.

Within the process of learning to learn, Dealtry includes to be aware of personal learning style, learning skills, and methods of learning, among other factors (2004: 106). Thus, the learner should formulate a personal learning strategy within the workplace (idem. 107). Despite the valuable awareness process that this proposal might develop, the application of this process, its praxis, as the author himself highlights, is not feasible if the culture of the organisation does not allow it, if the organisation does not offer enough learning and development options or even if there is not enough budget allocated for this purposes.

As was already mentioned in the introduction of this work, lifelong learning brings positive outcomes for both, employers and employees. Dealtry acknowledges this by claiming that its benefits reaches all the stakeholders in the process, including colleagues and family. However, despite he offers some insights into the process to reach these outcomes, he does not delve into the methodology or available tools to achieve learning awareness. In addition, the author does not take into account that culture influences the perspective and value of learning (cfr. Hofstede 1986; Marquardt et al. 2004).

#### 4.1.2 Additional resources for workplace learning: Informal learning

The formal methodologies and tools are designed to start, follow, and develop lifelong learning. These resources are consciously chosen and appointed so skills competences and development can be enhanced within a period of time. Their importance might also rely on the fact that "self-defined learning organizations often tend to value their formalized training programs as demonstrating to customers, competitors, prospective

and current employees, among others, that they are committed to learning.” (Conlon 2004: 286) However, according to Conlon, those methodological resources are not the only sources of workplace learning.

As an alternative of formal learning, Conlon analyses and encourages the opportunity of informal learning in the workplace. According to Conlon informal learning refers to “learning resulting from natural opportunities for learning that occur in everyday life when the person controls his or her own learning.” (2004: 285) In addition of being cost efficient, informal learning does not require a specific location for training development or allocating working hours during an inflexible time frame.

Action oriented employees can find sources of informal learning through the interaction of the organisation teams, customers or networking. On the other hand, employees that are not that proactive or prone to interact within the workplace, can find opportunities to acquire informal learning through coaching or mentorship.

Following the premise that in a global economy a key competitive advantage is an organisation multicultural diversity, Conlon emphasizes that informal learning is an opportunity to be expose to multiple perspectives. As a consequence, this foster creativity and problem solving. In addition, informal learning is an opportunity for the employee to set her or his own growing path that can go beyond the work environment to the personal level.

Conlon, following Kolb’s experiential learning theory (1984), notes that reflection is a critical element of informal learning in order to create awareness in the knowledge acquired and set clear learning goals. Despite reflection is a regular cognitive process, he dismisses that, according to Kolb’s learning style model, only diverging and assimilating learners have a more reflective learning style (see Table 1).

Accommodating learners might also be suitable types for informal learning because one of their strengths is to be involved in new experiences (see Table 1). However, both type of learners might not be aware of their own tasks in the workplace nor the skills and

competencies that they need during their work life. Thus, they are not aware what should be assessed.

Lack of awareness in our own tasks and skills or competences is common. A useful example of this is the study conducted by Lantz and Friedrich (2003). They conducted an interview based assessment to analyse workplace competences. The link of this assessment to informal learning is that if the assessment is applied, it shall provide comprehension of work skills. If skills needed at the workplace are clearly stated and employees are aware of their skills, informal learning might be a source of learning in the workplace.

Lantz and Friedrich conducted the study using the instrument for competence assessment (ICA). Their sample were employees from SMEs in the industrial and manufacturing industries, hence, the approach to learning from different professional activities was covered (2003: 191). The advantage of the ICA, according to the authors, is that “the interview can stimulate reflection on needs for the development of competencies and to increase awareness of their applicability in the current workplace or in new settings:” (ibid. 193) Evidently, the ICA is a research instrument, but, due to the positive outcomes in the reflection and awareness process, trainers can use it as a guideline to implement key questions within their training development. This will support training delivery, their comprehension, and the engagement of the audience to the training.

A disadvantage of the ICA is that it is time consuming. This will hinder the accomplishment of the learning objectives for training delivery. In addition, Lantz and Friedrich (2003: 190) suggest that the questions included in the ICA might not be clear for some participants. They might provide answers that are more related to personality than to workplace competences.

Despite the advantages of informal learning and its potential validation if ICA is used, Conlon points out cultural challenges that this source of learning and development might face. He quotes Hofstede (1996) to ponder about cultural differences and the applicability and effectivity of informal learning at a global level.

Informal learning might be, and most probably in many organisations is, an element of workplace learning. However, it is a process that cannot be used as a tool for development because it is, to a certain degree, unreliable as a consequence of its own informal nature. In addition, multinational organisations might face more risk to go through intercultural misunderstandings and the effects of informal learning might actually hinder learning outcomes.

#### 4.2 Research approaches to assess workplace learning and their groups

Further above Hager's comprehensive review of the current literature on workplace learning has been discussed. As he debriefs the theoretical frameworks and their input to the topic, he also addresses the issues and questions that remain still unanswered.

Yamazaki, Toyoma and Putranto address the same issue in the topic of employee development. The authors state that "there seems to be a lack of both theoretical and practical information on employee development, particularly related to competency development" (2018: 275). Their claim about lack of theoretical information can be challenged by Hager's work who refers to authors that focus on the individuals' learning experience in the workplace and to authors that research on developing expertise (2011: 18 21). In addition, the OECD also has conducted several studies on skills. In its iLibrary, the OECD has issues available since 2013 in its skills studies published books. The iLibrary recognises the need to provide studies based on qualitative and quantitative analysis in order to address the demand and supply of skills in the market place (OECD 2018).

It can be claimed that Hager and the OECD articles and research do not cover competency development, as Yamazaki et al. suggest. A possible explanation for this might be that the definition between competency and skill might overlap. This issue is explained by the OECD (2016: 17) as follows:

A distinction is sometimes made between “competency” and “skill” in the literature on education and training. Competency is often presented as a capacity that can be applied to a relatively wide range of “real” contexts, while “skills” is considered a constituent unit of competency, that is, a specific capacity, often technical in nature, relevant to a specific context. [...] Both terms refer to the ability or capacity of an agent to act appropriately in a given situation. Both involve the application of knowledge (explicit and/or tacit), the use of tools, cognitive and practical strategies and routines, and both imply beliefs, dispositions and values (e.g. attitudes).

Regarding the practical information on competency development, Yamazaki et al. approach the issue by using Kolb’s learning styles theory as a tool to understand competencies in the workplace. The study involved 457 Indonesian government employees; the sample was divided into managers and non-managers (2018: 279)

In their analysis, the authors found that “managers were more abstract and less concrete than non-managers in their contextual circumstance in the Indonesian government.” (2018: 285). Thus, Yamazaki et al. suggest that due to the skills needed to deal with numbers and documents, understanding rules and procedures, and communicating with others within the workplace, managers are more prone to learn and develop competencies by abstract conceptualization.

After stating that Indonesian managers preferred to learn through abstract conceptualization, the authors refer to Kolb and Fry (1975) to claim that the preferred learning style of managers in the USA is through abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. In comparison, they also mention that Japanese managers are more likely to have an active experimentation mode (Yamazaki & Umera 2017). These empirical comparisons make evident that the culture factor also influences the preferred learning style model. The authors themselves point out that having only an Indonesian group as a sample is a limitation for the study because as a collectivistic culture, they tend to prefer working within groups, in comparison to the USA managers, for instance (Yamazaki et al. 2018: 287).

Finally, another limitation of the study is that the only resource for non-managers to develop competencies, according to Yamazaki et al., is to create a similar setting than the

managers within the workplace (2018: 285). This suggestion lacks further instruction or steps and does not provide tools or resources for non-manager to learn on enhance skills within the workplace.

#### 4.2.1 Research approaches outside the workplace to upgrade professional development

Rodwell (2005) reinforces the need to develop competencies and skills from managers within organisations due to the fast global environment. In order to trace and place suitable changes, the author examines the background of the managers from the perspective of their academic education. Despite this literature review focus on learning in the workplace, this article is taking into consideration because it claims to be a practical tool to affect positively in the performance of the managers in their current or potential workplace environment.

The sample of this study was composed by 79 English speaking and non-English speaking background students in an Australian University. The non-English speaking background students are just referred as Asian. No further national descriptions were mentioned. The hypotheses that Rodwell proposes are that essential competences required in management will be increased after students go through management courses. The study followed a Pre, Post, Then design research design to survey the sample. As a secondary hypothesis of the study is that learning styles affect competence changes (2005: 241, 243).

The results of this study indicate that there is indeed a competence development at the end of the courses in management. In connection with the learning styles of the students, the findings suggest that in general the Asian group were mainly divergents. After the three-survey stages, the results showed that there was no shift in the preferred learning styles of the subjects studied but that accommodators need more support in personal development competencies and prefer more hands-on material (Rodwell 2005: 247).

Rodwell claims that his study is significant because it is a baseline measurement for comparison to test programmes that aim to improve management competences either in the academia or in the workplace. The strength of his research, according to the author,

resides in the Pre, Post, Then research design as a tool to create awareness and monitor competence development (Rodwell 2005: 249).

Rodwell's finding may well have a bearing on the academia field, but not in the workplace environment as he claims in the introduction of his article (2005: 239). The transformation and/or development process is very broad for a multinational organisation that request to see the return on the investment in less than what an academic programme lasts. In addition, the competences that shall be improved should be develop for the teams or units in a multicultural organisation whose members have to work together in a pre-established dynamic or hierarchy, according to the organisation. Thus, the implementation of the process is not comparable with the time frame and team structure of a university and its students.

Not only studies in academia to improve content in has been done. Harris, Chung, Mutchins and Chiaburu (2014) studied a group of business student in order to improve training delivery in organisations from the trainer and trainee perspectives. The authors (2014: 336) assess:

- Trainers: Trainers directive behaviours (the trainer behaviour related to learning structure)
- Trainees: Trainee learning goal orientation
- Training outcomes: Trainee course satisfaction

The results of the study show positive outcomes if the training environment trainers and trainees are involved. Evidently, trainers need to be aware of their training structure, but also trainees need to be aware of their learning goals. Based on these results, the Harris et al. suggest that organisations need to take into account that trainees are aware of their learning objectives before joining any training in their organisation. The solution proposed is a pre course survey or a debrief session by the organization about the learning needs of their members. Thus, trainers can be aware of their target audience and adjust their training structure (Harris et al. 2014: 340).

The limitations of the study are that the sample is homogenous. Therefore, training and trainer perceptions might vary within multicultural groups, nevertheless, the suggested debrief can help to overcome this challenge.

#### 4.2.2 Research approaches outside the workplace to enhance intercultural skills

Nowadays it is more and more recognised that a key aspect of multinational organisations is the diversity found in their teams within their structure. Popescu (2014: 506) claims that multicultural teams are an asset because they improve competitiveness for organisations as they tend to be more creative and innovative. To highlight this asset, Popescu attempts to identify multicultural skills that are needed for multicultural groups to work with synergy in a short timeframe of adaptation. This data will allow, according to the author, intercultural competence development for improving staff efficiency (ibid. 505).

Popescu research is based on psychological test battery based on four questionnaires. Her study groups were from a Romanian and a French polytechnic universities. The author claims that her study “offers a new way to indirectly understand the intercultural skills. In addition, it can more effectively bring prominent skills in heterogeneous groups” (2014: 511). Nevertheless, the fact that she used questionnaire to assess multicultural skills marks her study as unreliable. As Hofstede et al. (2010) point out, personality and cultural background are not the same (see Figure 2).

#### 4.2.3 Learning spaces: college or workplace learning

In previous sections, authors used college students as samples for their research. I claimed that this does not work because the setting, college, it is different from workplace. Hodkinson (2005: 522) claims that the assumptions of the differences between educational learning and workplace learning are a misrepresentation.

As part of his findings that point out the similarities between college and workplace setting, Hodkinson lists (2005: 525):

- Learning is related to the particular practices found there, which are, in turn, part of a wider culture that is rooted in the past as well as the present.
- The practice of a particular learning site may or may not resemble a community of practice, in the narrower sense
- Learning entails attributes of both formality and informality
- Individual participation may be full time or part-time

He lists further reasons related to the social setting and internal structures in college and organisations. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that his first statement is related to learning as an experience.

Detailed examination of the relationship between learning and experience by Kolb (1984: 27) points out that “[k]nowledge is continuously derived from and tested out in the experiences of the learner.” In addition Joy and Kolb also identified that elements like level of education and area of specialization have a high impact in our learning process (see Joy & Kolb 2009: 83). Thus, the analysis by Hodkinson lacks significant findings between the college and the work environment groups.

#### 4.3 Tools for learning organisations

In his article based on an interview to Marquardt, Reese quotes him to trace the development of learning organisation research and its application. He states that at the beginning it was based on the description of its importance, theory and philosophy (2018: 355). Reese highlights that these elements can be found in Marquardt’s theory too. However, Marquardt gave a step further when he developed his tool, Learning Organization Profile. This tool provides a call to action and describes suitable activities and assessments to start the process and follow a path towards a successful learning organisation (idem. 357–358). To ensure practical material, he includes case studies in his theoretical framework and development. Nevertheless, this tool is addressed to change

management, to the strategic practitioners who are in charge to outline and observe the action plan. This does not address the actual performers who carry out training delivery within specific circumstances like multicultural groups, different learning styles of participants, or the concern about providing training to organisations within a short time frame, as it is the case with certain SME's.

After the overview of the tool and its contribution in the field, Reese questions its cross-cultural use (2018: 359). In order to contrast this statement, he reports that Marquardt claims that his publications and tool has been used in some Asian countries. Mainly, by students who would like to develop case studies in their research based on his methodology in order to graduate. However, the studies are applied within a single geographical region so this does not provide enough evidence about its application within multinational organisations and their multicultural teams. In addition, Reese clarifies that most of the case studies developed by students are not published in academic journals. What would be needed is a cross-national study to find its applicability or its adaptation to multinational teams.

Despite the fact that learning in the workplace is a key element for organisational development, it is common that tools like Marquardt's Learning Organization Profile, or other tools from recognised management consultancies like McKinsey's 7S or the Boston Consulting Group's Smart Design, approach learning, the trainers and the employees as items to be examined and checked upon in a list. Seeking to achieve successful organisational performance, organisations usually do not take into account the enablers of the process, that is, the employees who make things happen but who require skills and competences to be developed according to their professional needs in the workplace.

Nowadays organisational change is focus to develop the best culture to perform and get recognised for that, for instance, to get certificates that showcase that they are a great place to work. As a consequence, organisational goals have broaden and diluted. The emphasis in developing and training functional skills and competences in the workplace has redirected into training employees to have a successful organisational performance.

Polo, Cervai and Kantola recognised that due to the interest of the organisations in achieving a successful organisational performance “little attention has been paid to the reciprocal influence between organizational culture and organizational training.” (2018: 163). To achieve this link, the authors propose to develop a model that encourages a training culture. The benefits listed for having a training culture within an organisation are the same that some authors list for workplace learning (Marquardt et al. 2004; Malone 2005; OECD 2016).

In order to test the importance and perception of training at the individual, team and organisational level within an organisation, Polo et al. conducted a quantitative analysis with the training culture scale (TCS) as an instrument of research. Their sample consisted of 360 employees in the health care sector. Their results supported the positive perception of training in the three levels (2018: 166–167).

Polo et al. recommends to use the TCS as a tool to gather information of the perception of training in an organisation. The results of the assessment, they claim, will allow to identify acceptance of training and areas of improvement (2018: 169). However, it is important to highlight that their study was only conducted with participants of a single professional field, the health care sector, also, it is not indicated if it was a multicultural group or not. Therefore, the acceptance for training may be bias by the professional field of the sample and their cultural perception (Hofstede 1986; Joy & Kolb 2009; Minkov 2013)

In contrast with the TCS and their quantitative results, Burke and Hutchins conducted a qualitative study under a constructive perspective. They claim that a reason for conducting the study is because “research is needed to ensure best practices are both practical and theoretically sound.” (2008: 108)

Their findings report their text based survey. The sample of their survey was a group of professionals, some of them with Master degree education, who had an average of 14.5 year experience. In addition, the questions and their answers give perspectives from the

trainer, the training and the organisation itself. The perspective is holistic which gives a peripheral view of training development. Despite the remarkable characteristics of the sample, a disadvantage is that the group is homogenous.

The authors share the best practices by reporting the most significant answers. The value of their study is, as mentioned before, that their sample is highly experienced. However, the best practices were shared as anecdotes. This diminished the pragmatism of the results as the same environment shall be reproduced in order to take advantage of the best practices. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study might give guidance to the experience trainer who can adapt it to his or her own target audience.

#### 4.4 Resources outside the search limits

From the articles analysed so far, it is evident that there is great interest in the connection of diverse groups and learning in the workplace. The articles that the research yielded explore theoretical implications of the importance of lifelong learning in the workplace and the cultural differences that might emerge within multicultural groups during the process of learning and development. Research instruments used to assess the importance of workplace skills and competence development were mainly questionnaires (Joy & Kolb 2009; Rodwell 2005; Yamazaki et al. 2018).

Surprisingly, there were no results that included tools or manuals that might provide guidelines for trainers or practitioners whose target audience are groups within multinational organisations. Recommendations were given just to continue the research or to use tools that assess the whole multinational organisations as a single entity where the employees, the human factor, are just an element of a holistic organisational scan (Reese, 2018).

It can be claimed that further research needs to be done to create material that support trainers or practitioners with suggestions to design programmes that includes learning styles suggestions or best practices tailored to their target audience. However, while

browsing through the results of the search, there was an academic article that provides guidance for the trainers. The article is from 2002, outside the timespan in the search fields, however, it is included here because its results provide concrete information for designing and preparing training.

Buch and Bartley (2002) study confirms that learning styles shall be taking into consideration for training delivery. What is interesting about their findings related to learning styles in the group that they studied is that they also applied an instrument to measure the preferred delivery mode.

From the data collected, the findings support the expected preferred delivery mode for each learning style:

1.     Convergers: Computer-based
2.     Accommodators: Computer-based
3.     Divergers: Classroom-based
4.     Assimilators: Print-based

It is important to highlight that in all cases the overall preference was for classroom-based learning. Once this preference was taken out, the above choices were the most preferred. The disadvantage of this results is that they are out of date. Some of the options that the authors propose as computer based material is CD-ROM. Nevertheless, the relevance of this information still lies in its practical application. Thus, Buch and Bartley (2002) study serves as a bridge between theory and practice.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

If the literature about workplace learning is extensive, the literature about learning is even more extensive. Nevertheless, initial literature reviews yielded minimal evidence of adequate researches to date which consider to the relationship between learning styles as a methodology tool to train in multinational organisations. To overcome this research deficit, it becomes necessary to examine the intersection points between culture, workplace and learning styles. In reviewing such overlaps, additional supportive research material became evident.

Definitions of culture and an overview of learning styles were given to examine key characteristics. Existing research in the field of workplace learning is considered, together with the importance of lifelong learning.

Researchers in the field of workplace learning might delve into learning models and their cognitive process and include the workplace environment element (Illeris 2011). When this happens, the concept of learning organisation comes into play.

Research studies show partly positive outcomes between learning styles and culture. The biggest correlation was found between learning styles and the professional field of the sample. Nevertheless, a limitation of these studies is that the sample cover one to two national groups. Often, the comparison was under the simplistic perspective between the west and the east.

Workplace learning to date have considered learning styles and culture (Hager 2011; Jarvis 2010; Joy & Kolb 2009; Marquardt 2004) and their influence in the trainee's learning process. However, despite the literature about workplace and learning styles is extensive, I agree with Polo et al. who claim (2018: 163) that there is a communication problem between theory and training practices.

The aim of the present research was to examine practical examples of trainings and their best practices for heterogeneous groups working in multinational organisations.

However, most of the research focus on debriefing about the studied group characteristic and their learning styles or, just their learning process. No recommendation for training delivery for heterogeneous groups working in multinational organisations. Nevertheless, several secondary studies which focus on specific aspects of the training delivery were identified.

Further work needs to be done to synchronize theory and practise. Then, theory can guide practice by providing suggestions or best practice manuals, and theory can take examples from practice by assessing the learning outcomes of the trainees who are experiencing the knowledge transferred by the trainers.

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## APPENDIX

Appendix 1. The GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) project's nine cultural dimensions (2016)

**Performance Orientation:** The degree to which a collective encourages and rewards (and should encourage and reward) group members for performance improvement and excellence.

**Assertiveness:** The degree to which individuals are (and should be) assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in their relationship with others.

**Future Orientation:** The extent to which individuals engage (and should engage) in future-oriented behaviors such as planning, investing in the future, and delaying gratification.

**Humane Orientation:** The degree to which a collective encourages and rewards (and should encourage and reward) individuals for being fair, altruistic, generous, caring, and kind to others.

**Institutional Collectivism:** The degree to which organizational and societal institutional practices encourage and reward (and should encourage and reward) collective distribution of resources and collective action.

**In-Group Collectivism:** The degree to which individuals express (and should express) pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness in their organizations or families.

**Gender Egalitarianism:** The degree to which a collective minimizes (and should minimize) gender inequality.

**Power Distance:** The extent to which the community accepts and endorses authority, power differences, and status privileges.

**Uncertainty Avoidance:** The extent to which a society, organization, or group relies (and should rely) on social norms, rules, and procedures to alleviate unpredictability of future

events. The greater the desire to avoid uncertainty, the more people seek orderliness, consistency, structure, formal procedures, and laws to cover situations in their daily lives.