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## ARTICLE

# Enhancing Transfer of Learning from Seminary Classes to Pastoral Ministry

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## ABSTRACT

This article reviews the research on transfer of learning in order to inform the broader conversation about formation for ministry in theological education. It defines transfer of learning, and contextualizes it for theological education, as: the effective and continuing application by pastors to their performance in ministry of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs gained through seminary learning activities. The essay reviews three significant models of learning transfer, including Baldwin and Ford's (1988) generative model, and discusses the three broad variables that affect transfer: individual learner characteristics, the design of the educational program, and the context of the work and ministry environment. The article concludes with six recommendations for enhancing transfer of learning from seminary classes to pastoral ministry and presents two, brief case studies from seminary classes exemplifying these recommendations.

## KEYWORDS

transfer of learning, transfer of training, application of learning, theological education, seminary education, Baldwin and Ford

## INTRODUCTION

Cafferella and Daffron, in their definitive work on *Planning Programs for Adult Learners*, lament,

Though transfer to practice is considered to be an important part of the [educational] planning process, this component continues to be neglected. Rather, it is often assumed that the application of what was learned at an education or training program somehow just happens and any resultant changes are the worry of someone other than those responsible for [teaching] the program. (2013, 227)

Likewise, one of adult education's foremost senior scholars, Sharon Merriam suggests, "Perhaps because the adult education literature is relatively silent on the topic of transfer, many adult educators have only a cursory

understanding of the nature of transfer, including what facilitates or what hinders the process” (Merriam and Leahy 2005, 2). As Merriam and Leahy go on to note, the vast majority of studies on transfer of learning come from the fields of professional training (e.g., Continuing Professional Education) and Human Resource Development. If the field of adult education generally has not adequately accounted for transfer in its planning and implementing of educational programs, what about theological education? Not surprisingly, in a recent search I conducted, I found no journal articles which directly and primarily addressed the concept of transfer of learning and applied it to the context of theological education and training for pastoral ministry.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I will seek to address aspects of this gap in application. My purpose is to provide a review of the research on transfer of learning from social science literature over the last thirty years<sup>2</sup> and then to suggest implications for theological education. I will first define the concept and present three significant models of transfer of learning. Then, I will address various dimensions of transfer addressed by these models. Third, I will discuss the three broad variables that affect transfer: individual learner characteristics, the design of the educational program, and the context of the work and ministry environment. Finally, I will propose six recommendations for enhancing transfer of learning from seminary classes to pastoral ministry and present two, brief case studies from seminary classes exemplifying these recommendations.

The research on transfer of learning has broad implications for the prevailing models of theological education,<sup>3</sup> for the design and goals of entire seminary curricula,<sup>4</sup> and for supervised ministry programs (or clinical pastoral education). My purpose is to provide a gateway into the concept of transfer of learning for seminary educators in the hopes of informing the broader conversation about formation for ministry in theological education. The essay concludes with several recommendations for designing and teaching courses to enhance students’ ability to transfer classroom learning into pastoral practice. I confine my recommendations to individual seminary classes and offer two case studies as illustrations. The essay concludes by suggesting further avenues of research for bringing the literature on transfer of learning into generative conversation with the significant literature on formation in theological education.

## Definition and Models

The concept of transfer from the classroom or educational program to the work or ministry context is variously described as “transfer of learning,” “transfer of training,” “applications process” (Cafferella and Daffron 2013), or simply “application.” Especially within professional practice, transfer of learning focuses on how professionals make meaning using the knowledge gained from an educational program within their professional context (Daley 2001; Daley and Cervero 2016). A frequently referenced definition of learning transfer comes from Broad: “The effective and continuing application by learners—to their performance of jobs or other individual, organizational, or community responsibilities—of knowledge and skills gained in learning activities” (1997, 2). The literature typically uses the language of the applications of knowledge, skills, and abilities or attitudes (KSAs) to describe what are transferred (e.g., Daffron and North 2011; Blume et al. 2017). Thus, a contextualized definition of transfer of learning for pastoral ministry might be: The effective and continuing application by pastors to their performance in ministry of knowledge, skills, attitudes (KSAs), and beliefs gained through seminary learning activities.

A central feature of the definition of learning transfer includes the notion of effectiveness or success in transfer. All models of learning transfer seek to enhance, deepen, and broaden the application of learning to the work and ministry context. While numerous models of transfer exist, I will review three of the most significant. In 1988, Baldwin and Ford developed

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1 Using the ATLA Religion database and Google Scholar, I searched for articles using combinations and variants of the following key phrases: “transfer of learning,” “transfer of training,” “application of learning,” “theological education,” and “seminary education.” I found no journal articles which directly and primarily addressed the concept of transfer of learning within the context of theological education and/or clergy education. I found a handful of articles and a few dissertations which only mention the concept or discuss it in a minor way as part of much larger discussions on different topics.

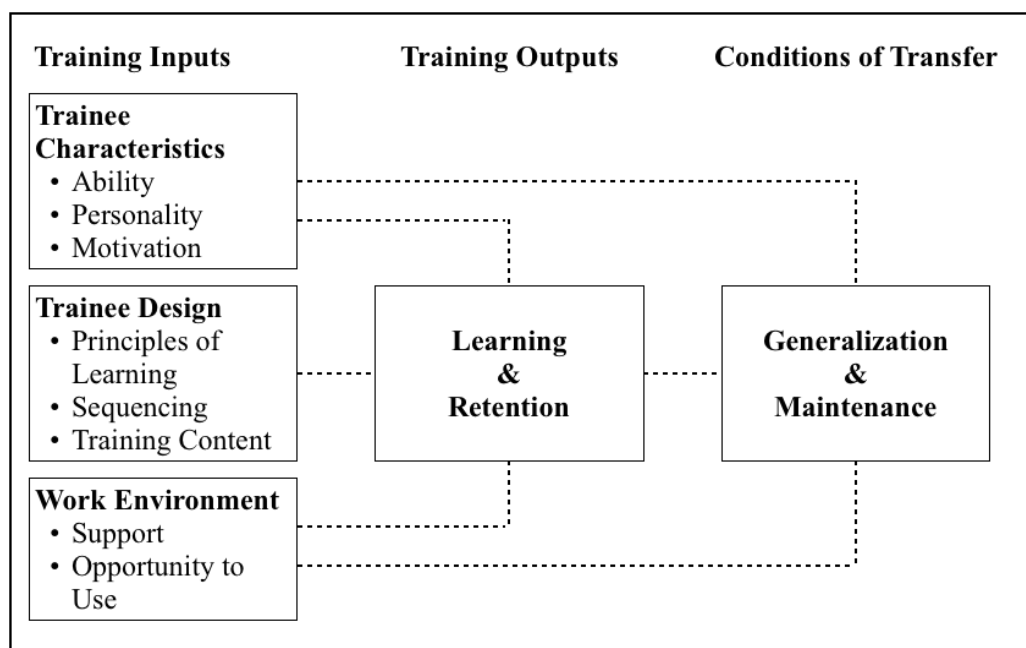
2 While the literature on transfer of learning can be traced back as early as 1901 to Edward Thorndike (Blume et al. 2010), Baldwin and Ford’s (1988) model and research program changed the landscape and have set the agenda for all subsequent research in this area (Merriam and Leahy 2005; Daffron and North 2011).

3 For discussion and historical perspective on the prevailing models of theological education see Aleshire (2010, 2018, 2021) and Miller (2007, 2014). For an important challenge to the models of theological education from a missional perspective see Cronshaw (2012).

4 Important resources in this regard are Foster et al. (2006) and Shaw (2014).

their initial “Model of the Transfer Process” (Figure 1) in an article that reviewed and critiqued the transfer research from 1901 to 1987 and suggested new directions for research. The field responded, and their model has become the most cited, discussed, and developed model in the literature (Merriam and Leahy 2005; Blume et al. 2010; Daffron 2011). Their model describes a process comprised of training input factors, training outcomes, and conditions of transfer. The three training input categories classify the main variables in transfer effectiveness.<sup>5</sup> Baldwin and Ford (1988) observed that the research to date had tended to focus on training design and that much more research was needed in the areas of trainee characteristics and the work context (cf. Cervero 1985). As can be seen in their model, Baldwin and Ford (1988) placed a strong emphasis on the planning stage and on incorporating all the stakeholders (i.e., learner, trainee, planner, teacher, trainer, supervisor, and organization as whole), which they posited should lead to successful transfer. While their model presents important interactions between training inputs, learning outcomes, and learning transfer, it is still somewhat mechanistic and linear.

**Figure 1:** Model of the Transfer Process (Baldwin and Ford, 1988)

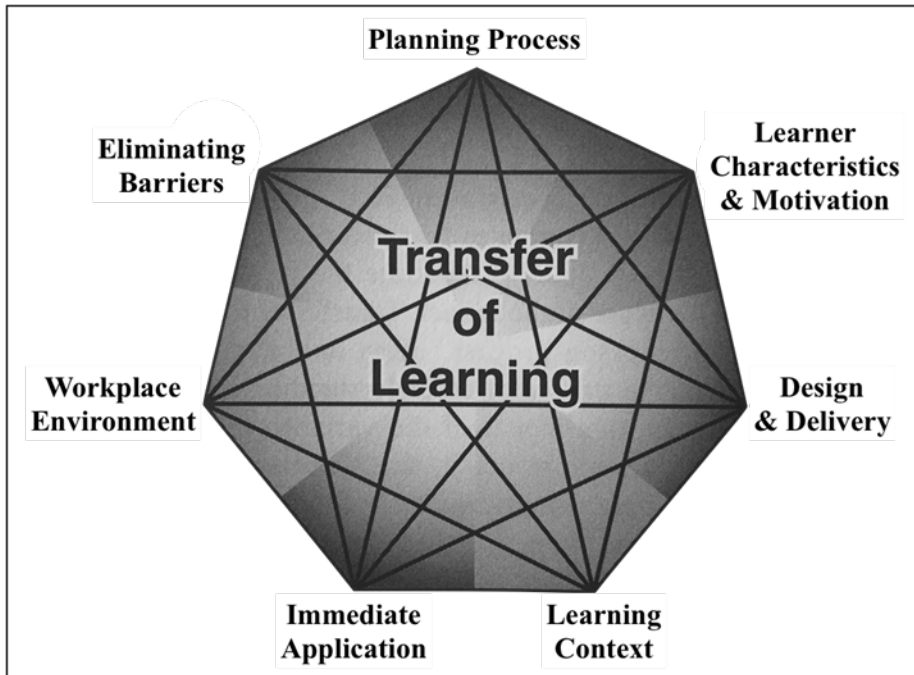


As research advanced, framed by the Baldwin and Ford (1988) model, researchers recognized how significant the sociocultural context of the work environment was to transfer (e.g., Clark 2002; Bates and Khasawneh 2005; Baldwin, Ford, and Blume 2009; Daffron and North 2011).<sup>6</sup> Further, researchers also discerned that the dimensions of learning transfer are interrelated, dynamic, and multidirectional (e.g., Daffron and North 2011; Blume et al. 2017). Within this line of thinking, Daffron and North (2011) posit the Successful Transfer of Learning Model (Figure 2). They state, “We designed this graphic to illustrate the multifaceted, nonlinear, and interactive nature of the model. Transfer of learning is indeed a complex and perplexing process” (2011, 8). Their model incorporates all the stakeholders in the learning process across all phases of training (i.e., pre-, during, and post-training) and intertwines the stakeholders’ responsibilities, phases, and the seven variables discerned in their research.

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough discussion of these three variables, see the section below on “Variables that Affect Transfer.”

<sup>6</sup> I will discuss this in more detail below when I discuss the variable of the context of the work environment. From the perspective of learning theory, cf. the concepts of “situated cognition” and “situated learning” (Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989; Lave and Wenger 1991; Wilson 1993).

**Figure 2:** Successful Transfer of Learning Model (Daffron and North, 2011)



The interactive model of learning transfer developed by Daffron and North (2011) can be supplemented with the recent model developed by Ford and his colleagues (Blume et al. 2017), which represents the most recent revised model of Baldwin and Ford (1988). Blume et al.’s Dynamic Transfer Model (DTM; Appendix 1), develops

a dynamic, iterative model of transfer over time from an interactionist perspective. The focus of such a model is the examination of the links from intentions to transfer at the end of training, to initial attempts in using the training, and then to the continuation of training transfer over time that impacts work behavior and performance. (2017, 2)

The significance of this model lies in the emphasis it places upon the participant’s purposeful intent to transfer learning during the post-training phase over an extended period of time and many iterations as mediated by the contextual factor of the work environment and personal trainee characteristics. In their previous research (Blume et al. 2010), Blume and his colleagues found that the majority of empirical studies from 1988 to 2008 evaluated the use of transfer immediately following (or shortly thereafter) the training program and were mostly self-reported by the trainee. They called for future studies to evaluate the effectiveness of transfer after longer and multiple intervals post-training using other measures in addition to trainee self-reporting. The DTM (Blume et al. 2017) takes up this perspective and seeks to provide a framework for such research and practice.

The three models I have reviewed should not be understood as competing models, but rather used in a complementary fashion. Each model assumes that a collaborative process exists between all stakeholders (i.e. learners, planner, teacher, and workplace or ministry supervisor and peers) in order for transfer to be maximized. Each model accentuates an important perspective on effective transfer of learning, which the others do not. Baldwin and Ford (1988) highlight how important the planning process, especially before the educational program, is for transfer. Daffron and North (2011) emphasize that none of the variables of transfer can be abstracted from the others as more significant, but all must be attended to in devising plans for successful learning transfer. Blume et al. (2017) stress the dynamics of the post-course phase, as socio-culturally embedded learners actively personalize application to their work and ministry contexts over time.

## Dimensions of Transfer of Learning

In this section, I will describe three dimensions of learning transfer which the above models propose and incorporate: generalization, maintenance, and personalization.

In Baldwin and Ford's (1988) model, they proposed the main dimensions, or conditions of transfer of learning, as "generalization" and "maintenance," which subsequent research has taken up as categories of measure (Baldwin, Ford, and Blume 2009; Blume et al. 2010; Blume et al. 2017). "For transfer to have occurred, learned behavior must be generalized to the job context and maintained over a period of time" (Baldwin and Ford 1988, 63). "Generalization refers to the extent to which trained skills and behaviors [and attitudes] are exhibited in the transfer setting" (Baldwin and Ford 1988, 95). For example, how well have pastors generalized the skills of exegesis learned in seminary classes and transferred it into their practice of regular teaching and preaching? Or how have they generally applied a charitable attitude toward diverse people in their congregations and communities based on similar attitudes cultivated through navigating learning experiences with diverse seminary colleagues?

In contrast to generalization, "maintenance concerns the length of time that trained skills and behaviors continue to be used on the job" (Baldwin and Ford 1988, 95). Decreases or increases of application over time could be considered by different types of "maintenance curves," which represent the change in KSAs "exhibited in the transfer setting as a function of time elapsed from completion of the training program" (96) (see Appendix 2 for Baldwin and Ford's diagram). For example, how well do pastors who have studied Greek and Hebrew in seminary maintain proficiency in those languages within the practice of ministry? Or how well do pastors maintain their knowledge of church history as a lens through which to evaluate contemporary theological, social, and institutional movements?

While generalization and maintenance continue to be main dimensions of learning transfer, subsequent research has discerned the importance of "personalization" (Daley 2001, 2002; Daley and Cervero 2016; Baldwin, Ford, and Blume 2009; Blume et al. 2017). A personalization perspective recognizes the learner as an active participant in learning and transfer. It emphasizes the learner's agency and that, although the ministry context and culture provide contours and constraints to application, some level of individual choice exists to "discard, maintain, apply, or modify training knowledge and skills in [the] work context" (Blume et al. 2017, 7). Daley (2001) describes this process of personalization as the way in which the knowledge from continuing professional education (CPE) becomes meaningful in professional practice. She concludes that professionals

did not see transfer of learning as an outcome of their educational endeavors; they viewed transfer as an integral part of the meaning-making process. New information learned in CPE programs was added to a professional's knowledge through a complex process of thinking about, acting on, and identifying their feelings about new information. Professionals indicated that new information had to connect to other concepts before it was meaningful to them, and part of the process of making knowledge meaningful was to use it in practice in some way. Thus, transferring information to practice was essential to the process of meaning making because often, in this process of using information, the professionals again changed what the information meant to them based on the results they observed. In other words, incorporating new knowledge is a recursive, transforming process, rather than a simple, straightforward transfer of information from one context to another. (Daley 2001, 50)

Daley and Cervero (2016) build upon Daley's (2001, 2002) earlier work and suggest a model of learning in CPE in which the personalization of transfer occurs through the interaction between the professional's new KSAs (developed through constructivist and transformative learning experiences), the work context, and professional development practice (see Appendix 3). Daley and Cervero's model provides a holistic and integrative view of learning transfer within the professional's experience. Thus, for example, in the ministry context, deeper learning transfer occurs when pastors not only seek to apply newly learned homiletical skills but decide how they will personalize these skills in a way that works for them and their ministry context.

The dimension of personalization in learning transfer, or the meaning making process in professionals' application of CPE, is also described by other terms in the literature, especially as developed in the ideas of "closed" and "open" skills

(Yelon and Ford 1999; Baldwin, Ford, and Blume 2009; Blume et al. 2010; Yelon, Ford, and Bhatia 2014; Blume et al. 2017). A trained closed skill is one particular way to act, done in a precise way (e.g., exegeting a passage of Scripture or creating a congregational budget). Open skills are more creative and adaptive, with no one right way to do them. Open skills give the individual freedom to perform based on trained principles or theory (e.g., writing and delivering a sermon or leading a new ministry initiative). In open trained skills, professionals make personal choices whether to and how to apply the principles and procedures learned in training to their job contexts (Yelon, Ford, and Bhatia 2014). In summary, the goal of personalization in transfer of learning is that *open* KSAs would transfer far and deep in the life and the professional and ministerial context of the learner.

For effective transfer, classroom learning must be generalized across learners' work and ministry contexts, maintained successfully over time in their real-world practice, and purposefully adapted and meaningfully contextualized to their environments. How can such transfer be effectively accomplished? In the next section, I will address the three significant variables which determine whether learning transfer is successful.

## The Main Variables that Affect Transfer of Learning

The literature generally discusses three broad variables that affect transfer: individual learner characteristics, the design of the educational program, and the context of the work environment (e.g., Baldwin and Ford 1988; Merriam and Leahy 2005; Baldwin, Ford, and Blume 2009; Blume et al. 2010; Daffron and North 2011; Blume et al. 2017).

Individual learners have sets of characteristics which they bring to training, through which they experience classroom instruction, and out of which they apply the learning. While the learner's cognitive ability is the single largest predictor of effective transfer to the professional context (Blume et al. 2010), and personality traits such as conscientiousness and extraversion are also significant predictors of learning transfer (Naquin and Holton 2002), there are other factors that can be directly addressed by educational planners and teachers to enhance transfer. Two key factors include learner motivation and self-efficacy.

Motivation to learn, and to transfer one's learning to the work and ministry context, is a significant variable in effective learning transfer (Daffron and North 2011). Motivation is complex and can be affected by numerous elements. Students who participate in training voluntarily, rather than fulfilling a mandatory requirement, tend to have higher motivation to learn (Blume et al. 2010; Daffron and North 2011) due to the difference between intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg 2017). Those who attend classes voluntarily tend to see value in learning new KSAs and expect to change as a result of the educational experience (Daffron and North 2011). Thus, seminary educators can capitalize on this aspect of student motivation to enhance transfer since nearly all seminary students have voluntarily chosen to enroll in seminary.

But, what about "mandatory" training or "required" seminary classes in which students tend to enter demotivated or with little motivation to learn? Even in these cases, faculty members can plan and communicate in a such a way to seek to increase motivation. They can design the educational experience so that what participants learn will be valuable to them and the learned KSAs will be immediately applicable in their ministerial roles. Further, this value proposition could be communicated to the participants before the educational program begins. If students have a positive expectation for value, and the training subsequently delivers this value, then this tends to increase learning motivation, and subsequently transfer (Daffron and North 2011).

While motivation ultimately remains a function of the individual learner's agency, motivation to learn can be enhanced by teachers adopting a series of motivational strategies for their course design and delivery methods (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg 2017). Motivational scholars, Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017), propose a Motivational Framework for Culturally Inclusive Teaching which includes four broad strategies:



- **Establishing Inclusion:** Creating a learning atmosphere in which learners and teachers feel respected and connected to one another.
- **Developing Attitude:** Creating a favorable disposition toward the learning experience through personal relevance and volition.
- **Enhancing Meaning:** Creating challenging and engaging learning experiences that include learners' perspectives and values.
- **Engendering Competence:** Creating an understanding that learners are effective in learning something they value.

In addition, motivating teachers display a series of common characteristics including expertise in their field, empathy in their classroom leadership, enthusiasm for their subject, being clear and structured in their presentation and delivery, and being culturally responsive to diverse learners in the classroom (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg 2017).

Closely related to motivation to learn, and related to Wlodkowski and Ginsberg's (2017) "engendering competence," is the quality of learner self-efficacy. Higher self-efficacy tends to result in more effective transfer of learning (Blume et al. 2010; Daffron and North 2011). Self-efficacy is "the feeling one has about being able or capable of completing a specific task successfully. Those with strong feelings of self-efficacy are able to overcome difficulties in complicated tasks" (Daffron and North 2011, 44). Thus, teachers should seek to employ teaching methods and practice scenarios within the class itself which seek to engender competence in using the new acquired KSAs. For example, to promote self-efficacy in the student, a theological educator could design an exegetical or theological term paper to be developed over a series of stages, instead of turned in all at once. During each stage, the instructor could provide feedback and encourage iteration apart from a formal, graded assessment which would not occur until the final submission of the paper at the end of the semester. Such an approach tends to build a learner's sense of personal ability to complete a difficult task over several iterations successfully, thereby facilitating the formation of the learner's self-efficacy.

Besides individual learner characteristics, the design of the educational program can enhance or impede learning transfer to the work and ministry context. Numerous strategies have been shown to promote successful transfer before, during, and after the formal educational program.

Before the training begins, one of the most important commitments to plan for transfer is the collaboration of all stakeholders in the planning process (Cervero and Wilson 2006; Daffron and North 2011; Cafferella and Daffron 2013). So important is collaboration that Daffron and North state: "The program planning process is the beginning of what must be a collaborative process for all the stakeholders in continuing professional education. If the process is not collaborative, even from the first stage, the transfer to practice is likely to fail" (2011, 12). They suggest that collaborative input should come from educational planners, trainers, teachers, organizational managers, supervisors, and the learners themselves. A common method of collaboration with an eye to successful learning transfer is to conduct a needs assessment so that the class topics can be accurately targeted to the learners' contexts (Daffron and North 2011; Cafferella and Daffron 2013). The assessment must not just include the needs of the work and ministry context, but the perceived needs of the learners themselves. "When the training content meets needs of the learners, then learning is more likely to transfer" (Daffron and North 2011, 14). This aspect of pre-course, collaborative design represents both a critique and a challenge to theological education. To what extent have seminary administrators and faculty members sought to include the churches, denominations, other ministries, students, and alumni who they serve in their educational planning? To what extent is such collaborative planning even feasible?

In addition to planning for transfer before the class begins, strategies exist that teachers can employ during the class which tend to enhance learning transfer. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2015) advocate active learning strategies consistent with andragogical principles. In the same vein, Daley and Cervero (2017) argue teachers ought to view themselves less as deliverers of content and more as facilitators of "learning, growth, and change in professional practice. It means that when CPE providers create programs, they will need to . . . incorporate methods that encourage participants to link the content

of the program to their actual practice and their work environments” (26). Based on their review of the empirical research, Baldwin and Ford (1988) identify four basic learning principles which link the program to the work context and have been shown to lead to effective learning transfer.

- **Identical elements:** Transfer increases “to the degree that there are identical stimulus and response elements in the training and transfer contexts” (Daffron and North 2011, 66). For example, the educator may seek to match the course experiences of simulations, problem solving, role playing, etc. to the real-world setting of the ministry context.
- **General principles:** Practical skills are taught along with the general rules or theoretical principles that underlie those skills (i.e., theology connected to praxis).
- **Stimulus variability:** Using different examples to illustrate a concept helps learners to generalize and personalize the new KSAs to their work setting.
- **Conditions of practice:** “Conditions of practice include a number of specific design elements, including massed or distributed learning, whole or part training, feedback, and overlearning” (Baldwin and Ford 1988, 67). Basically, this principle recognizes the importance of practice with feedback within the educational program itself (Daffron and North 2011).

In short, learning transfer tends to be more successful if, during the class, the facilitators employ active learning methods within a learning context that replicates as closely as possible the authentic work and ministry context of the learners.

The design of the training does not end with the conclusion of the formal program but should continue post-training (Cafferella and Daffron 2013). In fact, there are post-class strategies which can be employed which continue to promote learners’ transfer. Daffron and North (2011, 74-75) and Cafferella and Daffron (2013, 224) suggest several common strategies.

- Teachers could have learners develop their own application plan for their ministry context before the end of training. This plan can include things like how to share what they have learned with their supervisor and their peers, what changes will need to be made and what barriers will need to be addressed for successful application, or what feedback will need to be solicited from supervisors or mentors.
- Teachers can provide follow-up assistance to learners through techniques such as coaching, follow-up sessions, refresher courses, and mentoring.
- A student could be paired with a “learning partner” within his or her organization, as both seek to personalize and apply the new KSAs.
- Students could set aside some time daily or weekly for personal reflection related to transfer attempts.

In summary, when teachers thoughtfully design and deliver the educational program (including pre-, during, and post-class elements) with transfer of learning in mind, more effective and successful transfer tends to occur within the learner’s work and ministry context.

In addition to individual learner characteristics and the design of the training program, the third main variable of learner transfer is the context of the work or ministry environment (e.g., Cervero 1985; Baldwin and Ford 1988; Merriam and Leahy 2005; Baldwin, Ford, and Blume 2009; Blume et al. 2010; Daffron and North 2011; Blume et al. 2017). Daffron and North put it directly: “Much to our surprise we have found that a large portion of the responsibility [of transfer] falls directly on the organization” (2011, 140). While seminary educators have no control over this variable and in most cases have no direct influence upon their students’ ministry contexts, educators can still be mindful of this reality. As they are able, teachers can become acquainted with their students’ contexts, pray for their students especially related to their contexts, and coach students about the opportunities and challenges of their contexts related to class learning.



Blume et al. (2010) identify support, climate, and organizational constraints as the most significant aspects of the work environment affecting transfer of learning. Support includes supervisor and peer support. To what extent is the learner's supervisor not only supportive of professional development, but actively encouraging training and providing constructive feedback and evaluation of the learner's attempts to apply new KSAs? Similarly, how supportive, encouraging, and ready to learn are the learner's peers in the ministry context as the student returns from training?

In addition, the climate, or culture, of the organization can enhance or stifle learning transfer (Daffron and North 2011; Bates and Khasawneh 2005). To what extent can the organization be described as a "learning organization" (Senge 2005)? How open is the organization to change and innovation? Dwyer describes a positive work climate as having at least five qualities: "It must be emotionally safe; free from intimidation and rejection; high in acceptable challenge; a place of active participation, and a place where learners can experience a relaxed alertness" (2001, 312; summarized in Daffron and North 2011, 114). In sum, healthy, positive psychological work and ministry climates tend to maximize learning transfer, while unhealthy and negative climates tend to minimize transfer. As previously mentioned, theological educators have no control over this aspect of their students' ministry climates, but, as they are able, they can help to guide students in critically reflecting upon the health of their contexts with an eye toward how class learning might transfer.

According to Blume, et al. (2010), a third aspect of the context of the work environment is organizational constraints. "Constraints" need not be understood only negatively, but also as "contours." Daley (2002) explains how the sociocultural context of professional practice provides "frames" which both constrain application and provide a lens through which professionals view their work. She identifies four characteristics through which professionals use new knowledge in their work, including allegiance to the profession, the nature of professional work, variations in organizational culture, and the level of independence and autonomy. Her final characteristic, autonomy, bears further discussion (2002, 79-80). Along with Yelon and Ford (1999), Daley (2002) observes autonomy to be a significant contour to how and how much learners transfer learning to their work context. Typically, early career professionals enjoy less autonomy than later career professionals do. Additionally, professionals in more traditional or bureaucratic organizational systems tend to have less autonomy. Depending upon the level of autonomy, the supportive role of the participant's supervisor becomes more or less important, impacting the effectiveness of transfer. In regard to this variable of transfer, seminary educators could be mindful of what ministerial stages are represented by the learners in their classes. How can teachers tailor their encouragements toward transfer for the young, student pastors compared to the older, seasoned pastors in their classes?

In this section, I have surveyed the three main variables discussed in the literature which directly affect learning transfer of newly acquired KSAs from an educational program to the work and ministry context. These variables included individual learner characteristics, the program design and delivery, and the organizational/ministry context. While I have discussed these three variables separately, in reality they are immediately intertwined and dynamically related, consistent with Daffron and North's (2011) Successful Transfer of Learning Model and Blume et al.'s (2017) Dynamic Transfer Model.

## Enhancing Learning Transfer from Seminary Classes to Pastoral Ministry

Above I contextualized Broad's (1997) definition of learning transfer to pastoral ministry as *the effective and continuing application by pastors to their performance in ministry of knowledge, skills, attitudes (KSAs), and beliefs gained through seminary learning activities*. Based on the preceding discussion of the literature, what contextualized strategies could seminary faculty use to foster their students transfer of learning from classes into pastoral ministry? In this final section, I will propose six recommendations for enhancing transfer<sup>7</sup> and offer two, brief case studies from seminary classes exemplifying these principles. While the foregoing review of the literature may have broader implications that challenge the predominant models of theological education or suggest significant revisions to how administrators and faculty design entire seminary curricula and curricular goals, these remain outside the scope of this article. I believe these larger questions would constitute valuable avenues for further research and discussion in theological education.

<sup>7</sup> The recommendations which follow mostly assume that seminary students are embedded and actively serving in some kind of pastoral capacity in a local church, which is more formalized than an ordinary lay member's service in the local church. Thus, I assume that at minimum they are serving as formal interns, if not paid part-time or full-time ministry staff members or pastors. I have attempted to provide recommendations which would be suitable for students who have both little pastoral experience and significant pastoral experience.

## ***Recommendations for Enhancing Transfer from Seminary Classes to Pastoral Ministry***

***Assess students' learning needs related to pastoral ministry.*** As the above models demonstrated, assessing students' actual and perceived learning needs tends to enhance transfer of learning from seminary classes to pastoral ministry. Seminary faculty members, as the content experts in their disciplines, generally know what their students need to learn in any given course. However, without conducting some kind of learning needs assessment, faculty members do not know what a particular group of students needs as learners, what a particular group of students needs based on their pastoral experience, or how a particular group of students would express what they perceive to be relevant to their ministry contexts. Additionally, incorporating students' expressed learning needs or ministry interests into how the class content will be considered exemplifies a collaborative approach between professors and students. As previously discussed, a collaborative approach to class design tends to increase transfer of learning. Thus, at least some kind of learning needs assessment before or at the outset of a class would be highly beneficial. Numerous options, from formal to informal methods, exist.<sup>8</sup> For example, faculty members could send out surveys or questionnaires to students in advance of classes, seeking information such as students' prior knowledge in the content area and students' pastoral experience and contexts. Even orienting questions can serve as learning needs assessments. Questions such as, "As you begin this class, what question do you have related to pastoral ministry which you hope is answered through our discussions?" or "What central opportunity or challenge in ministry are you facing which this class might help to address?" can unearth the learners' perceived needs. Collegial conversations with students inside and outside of class can also serve to identify developmental needs. With this information, faculty members can tailor their classes to enhance learning transfer into pastoral ministry.

***Integrate students' ministry context into the class.*** The research has demonstrated that one of the three most significant variables for transfer of learning is the students' ministry context. To what extent do students' ministry contexts provide supportive and healthy organizational climates in which to apply seminary learning? How do the organizational contours and stages of pastoral experience diminish or broaden the possibility of transfer of learning? While in most cases seminary educators have no control or direct influence upon their students' pastoral contexts, they can encourage students to integrate their ministry context into the class. This goes in two directions. First, faculty members can encourage students to bring their prior and current pastoral experience with them into class. For example, "What have you learned from your pastoral experience that connects, nuances, or seems to disagree with this aspect of theology we have been discussing?" Second, faculty members can encourage students to critically reflect upon their ministry contexts, seeking to identify what aspects of their contexts might hinder or promote transferability of class learning. For example, "Reflecting on the pressures and demands of your congregational context, what can you do to create space to apply what we have been learning?" Further, within the class, professors can leverage the pastoral experience of the seasoned pastors in their classes to stimulate the applicational thinking of novice pastors. Outside of class, as time allows, faculty in any theological discipline could seek to "pastor" some of their students, coaching and praying with them about their ministry contexts. In all these ways, more purposeful integration between students' ministry contexts and seminary classes tends to deepen learning transfer.

***Demonstrate and communicate the importance of personalized application.*** As seminary faculty seek to encourage students' integration between their ministry contexts and the classroom, they can specifically demonstrate and communicate the importance of personalized application. As discussed above, a central dimension of transfer of learning is personalization. Blume et al. emphasize how personalization acknowledges the learner's agency and that individual choice exists to "discard, maintain, apply, or modify training knowledge and skills in [the] work context" (2017, 7). Thus, any KSA learned in a seminary class must be personalized by students in order to be transferred into their pastoral ministries. To foster this personalization, theological educators can set the expectation that one of the most important goals for the class is to apply the learning to the students' pastoral context.<sup>9</sup> The expectation for and examples of application can be built into lectures, class discussions, written assignments, tests, and any other learning methods used. Moreover, faculty can share

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<sup>8</sup> For excellent resources on classroom assessment techniques (CATs), see Angelo and Cross (1993) and Barkley and Major (2016).

<sup>9</sup> I recognize that the most important goal for many students is simply to "get a good grade" by demonstrating what they have "learned" on graded assignments and tests. While theological educators cannot escape this reality, they can acknowledge its existence as an extrinsic motivator and an inferior reason to learn. In contrast, they can seek to design their courses and teach in ways that activate intrinsic motivation in their students and demonstrate the deeper learning constructed through application and personalization.

real-life stories of how they have personalized the KSA under discussion in pastoral ministry themselves or how they have seen their own pastors apply this KSA. Further, faculty could transparently model personalization appropriate to the course content. For example, a professor lecturing on the doctrine of sin could pause and tell a specific story about an idolatry he or she has struggled with, and how much he or she needs God’s grace because of that struggle.

**Use motivational and interactive teaching methods.** The models reviewed in section one emphasize that motivationally informed and interactive teaching methods based on principles of adult learning tend to enhance the transfer of learning. While motivation to learn and to apply the learning to ministry ultimately resides in each student, there is much seminary educators can do to teach in ways that seek to activate intrinsic motivation in their students.<sup>10</sup> In fact, motivational scholars, Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, argue that “every instructional plan also needs to be a motivational plan” (2017, 45). Further, the more interactions students have with class content the deeper the learning is (Ambrose et al. 2010). The *information* presented in class or in textbooks should be *transformed* by the students through multiple learning tasks into applicable KSAs for pastoral ministry. Some of these learning experiences can be designed to “provide authentic practice” (Yelon, Ford, and Anderson 2014, 948), which replicates as closely as possible the ministerial context for use of the KSAs. For example, when writing a lecture, theology professors can consider, “How might pastors use this aspect of theology as pastoral practitioners facing today’s cultural challenges?” Or, a class in pastoral leadership can run a semester-length simulation in which students are assigned various roles on a church board, debating a significant policy change for the church. In sum, transfer of learning for their students increases when seminary faculty employ teaching methods consistent with andragogical principles and aim to facilitate the learners’ agency.

**Provide applicable tools and resources for pastoral ministry.** The creation of classroom tools and aids which can also serve as valuable real-world ministry resources enhances learning transfer. Yelon, Ford, and Anderson observe, “[Students] used program session notes, slides, checklists, decision aids, charts, lists of principles or skill steps, diagrams of processes, annotated models, and mnemonics” back in their work contexts (2014, 948). Seminary faculty could be more deliberate in designing their PowerPoints, notes handouts, assignments, or discussion guides in ways that could be easily adapted to local church ministry practice. Other suggestions might be:

- Choose textbooks and resources which have enduring value and could be referenced and used fruitfully in local church ministry, not just in the academic seminary context.
- Teach students how to use Bible software so they can utilize it for their future teaching and preaching preparation.
- Design assignments where students build their own timelines, diagrams, or charts of periods of church history, biblical covenants, or relationships between the categories of systematic theology. These student-created resources can become personalized, go-to references for pastors to build upon in their congregational teaching ministries.
- In pastoral theology courses, provide templates for liturgies, planning guides for different kinds of services, personalized guides for congregational program planning, rubrics for evaluating Christian education materials, or case studies that could be reused in church board training sessions. Then, have students work with and personalize these templates for actual use in pastoral ministry.

**Require a contextual and/or team project.** A contextualized project, which links classroom learning and learners’ ministry contexts, can be an effective way to enhance transfer. Many seminary classes require at least one major research paper as a key assignment for the course. Why not adapt the research paper into a contextual project, which links some essential KSA from the class with a real-time ministry opportunity, challenge, or problem in the students’ congregational contexts? Even better, the project can be a collaborative project, with two or three students working together, since so much real-world pastoral work is conducted collaboratively through ministry teams and church boards. Students are not only actively personalizing their learning to their specific context, but they are also learning how to navigate the interpersonal dynamics

<sup>10</sup> See especially Wlodkowski and Ginsberg’s (2017), which I discussed above in section 3.1.

of a seminary team in ways that closely mirror the actual dynamics of team-based pastoral ministry. With either project approach, transfer of learning can be further enhanced by requiring both student self-assessment and peer assessment, along with ongoing faculty support, feedback, and assessment (Yelon, Ford, and Anderson 2014).

## ***Two Case Studies from Seminary Classes***

**Case 1: Transfer of learning in Educational Ministries and Leadership.** As an applied class in pastoral theology, Educational Ministries and Leadership was designed to be a contextualized and personalized class, thus enhancing transfer (Nelson 2019b). From the outset students are expected to incorporate their ministry experiences and contexts with the course learning. They are encouraged to critically reflect upon the course learning and consider how they might apply it to their ministries during every opportunity for interaction. Interaction with the course content, instructor, and between students occurs regularly through asynchronous forum posts, critical reflection responses to the instructor, and synchronous video conference class discussion sessions. In all these interactions, contextual application to ministry (with personal examples) is discussed and is a required part of interactions. Further, in these interactions the instructor has self-consciously adopted a teaching posture of “coach,” attempting to teach in ways resonant with andragogy and adult motivational learning theory. The instructor also gives examples from his own experience in pastoral ministry illustrating the educational theology, theory, or problem under consideration.

The four writing assignments and one team learning project were also conceived as ways to transfer learning into pastoral ministry (Nelson 2019a). The writing assignments vary in length from two to five pages, but each requires students to interact with the theory and theology discussed in class, critically reflect upon a relevant aspect of their ministries, and then discuss what they have learned. For example, for one assignment students experiment with three new (to them) teaching methods in a live teaching event in their ministry settings and then reflect upon what they learned and how they might incorporate their learning into their pastoral development. For another assignment students write a case study based on their own experience of a leadership challenge in their ministries. They then pilot that case study in a discussion group in their context and reflect upon what they learned from that experience. The team learning project is an iterative project over the course of half the semester. It requires several stages including planning, proposal, implementation (i.e. executing the teaching plan in at least one team member’s pastoral context), team reflection, and a final presentation to the whole class.

This course in educational ministry and leadership could be improved in at least two ways based on the research and principles of transfer of learning. First, while some attention is given to informally assessing the pastoral learning needs of the students, much more could be done. A more formalized learning needs assessment related to the course focus could be conducted before the semester begins. Students could be asked to obtain feedback from other leaders in their pastoral contexts, seeking particular avenues in which they could develop and mature through this course. As the instructor gains a clearer, collective sense of the students’ ministry contexts, they could tailor the learning tasks and navigate the discussion in ways which apply the course content more specifically. Second, while the textbooks were chosen for their possibly enduring value and translatability to pastoral ministry, much more could be done to produce applicable tools and aids to educational ministry and pastoral leadership. For example, one of the written assignments could be changed to have students create their own philosophy of educational ministry in the local church. This could serve as the first draft of a living document which succinctly summarizes the pastor’s convictions about educating God’s people and could guide his or her ministerial development.

**Case 2: Transfer of learning in Interpreting the Synoptics and Acts.** For the second case, I reviewed the syllabus for the course, Interpreting the Synoptics and Acts (Jipp 2019), and had a conversation with the professor about his intentional course design and teaching methods. The class exemplifies several principles which enhance transfer of learning into pastoral ministry. First, one of the expressed goals of the class is to develop “the skills necessary to be effective interpreters of” the Synoptics and Acts within pastoral ministry, not just as an intellectual or academic pursuit. One student learning outcome states, “Use the Synoptics and Acts as resources for theological reflection, preaching and teaching, pastoral leadership, and pastoral care.”

Second, toward that outcome, the instructor designed the major writing assignments, the final exam, and a team learning project to encourage students to adopt a pastoral mindset about key challenges, themes, and cultural applications of the scriptures. Over the course of the semester students write five short papers (five to seven pages in length) in which they address a key theme or specific issue in the Synoptics or Acts, decide upon their own view, and suggest implications relevant to contemporary leadership, discipleship, or cultural challenges which pastors face. One paper prompt serves to illustrate the kind of scripturally-informed, pastoral thinking required of students: “How do the Gospels function as resources for how we think about mass incarceration, relationships with immigrants and refugees, consumer/wealth and possessions, and/or leadership. Pick one topic.” In a similar way, the instructor designed a major portion of the final exam as a series of case studies drawn from real pastoral scenarios and involving key themes and interpretative challenges from the Gospels or Acts. Students must demonstrate both their interpretative ability and pastoral sense in discussing the case studies. Likewise, the team learning project forces students to consider interpretative traditions different from their own and to discuss what they can learn about their own pastoral attitudes and practice of ministry in a multicultural world.

Third, the instructor uses various teaching methods including interactive lectures, break-out small-group discussions, case studies, Greek language recitation sessions, and group presentations. While the course requires work in Greek, the instructor seeks to demonstrate its use and teach language skills in ways which are more conducive to real world pastoral practice in teaching and preaching. Additionally, the instructor teaches with enthusiasm for the subject, knowing this tends to motivate students to engage more fully in the class. He creates time to meet with students outside of class to get to know them and their ministry opportunities and challenges. This in turn informs how he more specifically tailors applicational thoughts and examples to the specific students in his class.

Thus, this second case provides a helpful example of how seminary courses in Bible, theology, or church history (i.e. courses outside the applied courses in pastoral theology) can be designed and taught to enhance transfer of learning into pastoral ministry. While this second case has many strengths related to transfer, it could be improved by incorporating a plan for formal and informal student needs assessments. The instructor could also consider ways to include collaborative planning with the students and further options for personalization of assignments depending upon the students’ pastoral contexts.

## Conclusion and Request for Future Research

In this article, I sought to introduce the research on transfer of learning to theological educators. In reviewing three significant models of transfer (Baldwin and Ford 1998; Daffron and North 2011; Blume et al. 2017), I discussed the key dimensions and variables of transfer, which include individual learner characteristics, the design of the educational program, and the context of the work or ministry environment. Based on my review, I suggested a contextualized definition of transfer of learning for seminary education as *the effective and continuing application by pastors to their performance in ministry of knowledge, skills, attitudes (KSAs), and beliefs gained through seminary learning activities*. I concluded by proposing six recommendations which theological faculty could use to enhance transfer to pastoral ministry among their students and I discussed two cases studies demonstrating transfer.

Part of the purpose of this article was to expose theological educators to the literature on transfer of learning and suggest its importance to seminary clergy education. It is only a beginning: it suggests avenues for further research and encourages conversation between this field and other contemporary, better-known streams of research on pastoral education. Thus,

- How might transfer of learning (formation?) inform formational models of seminary education (e.g., [Aleshire 2018](#), 2021; [USCCB 2005](#))?
- How might learning transfer and the literature on practice in the professions (e.g., Foster et al. 2006; Benner 2001; Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986) mutually benefit one another?
- How does transfer relate to pastoral development as “reflective practitioners” (e.g., Schön 1984, 1987)?

- What new generative insights might emerge by synthesizing the literature on the formation of the “pastoral imagination” (e.g., Dykstra 2001, 2008; Foster et al. 2006; Campbell-Reed and Scharen 2011; Scharen and Campbell-Reed 2016) and transfer of learning?
- Finally, how might administrators and faculty members in theological schools reconceive of the design and goals of the entire seminary curriculum with an eye to enhance transfer of learning?

I offer up these questions for further research in the spirit of the Apostle Paul’s admonition to Timothy, enjoining the perpetual task of gospel transfer from generation to generation: “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2).

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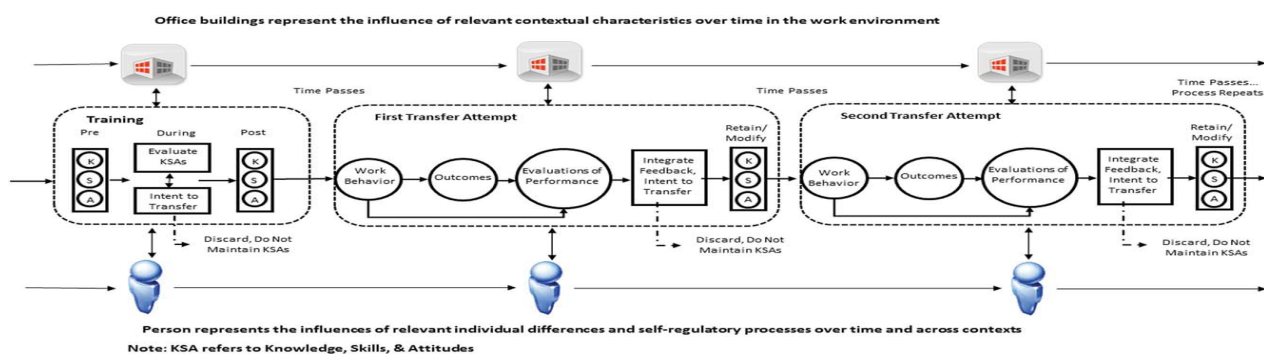
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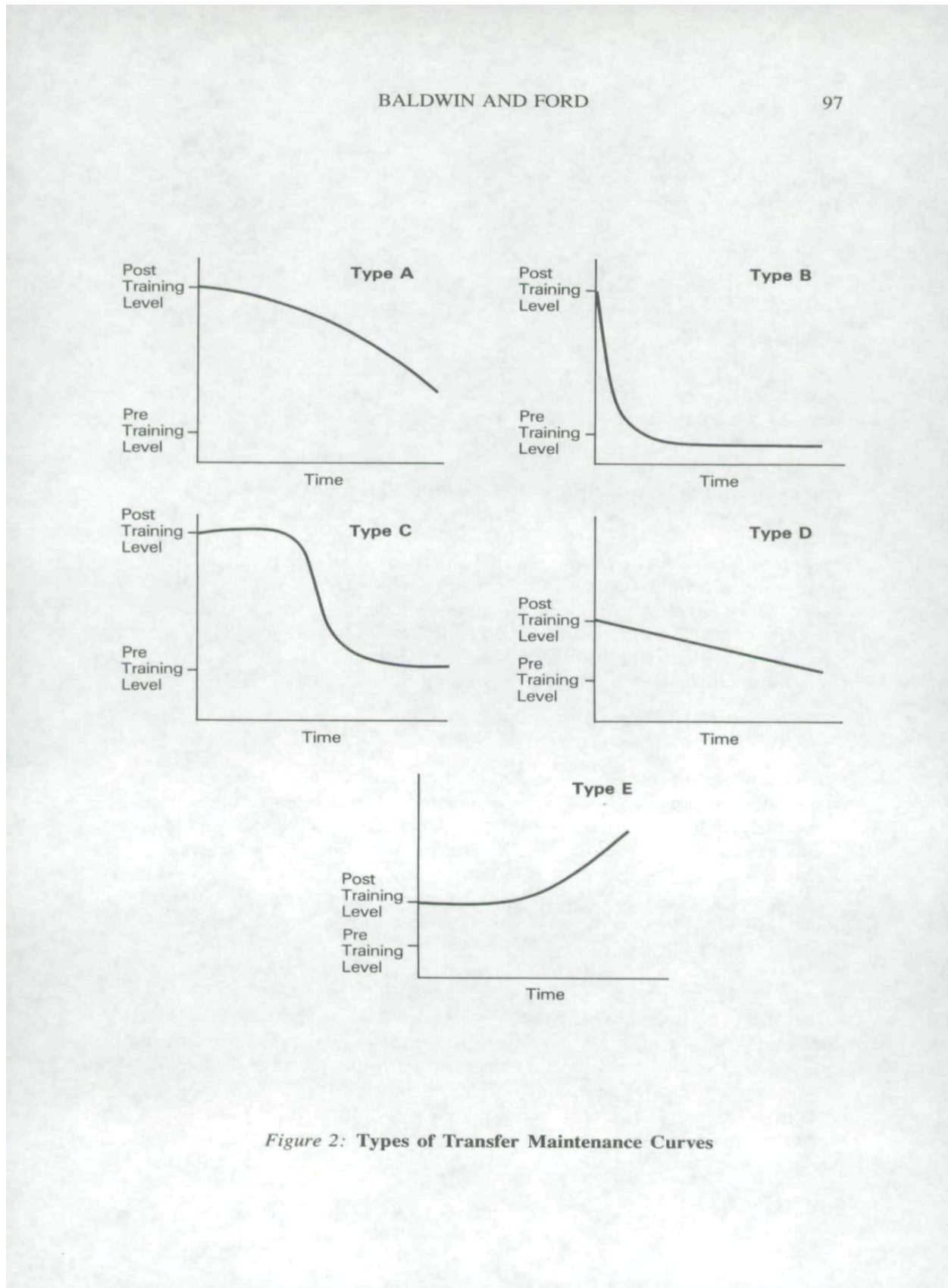
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### Appendix 1: Dynamic Transfer Model (DTM) (Blume et al. 2017, 3)



**Appendix 2:** Types of Transfer Maintenance Curves (Baldwin and Ford 1998, 97)



**Appendix 3: Model of Learning in CPE (Daley and Cervero 2016, 21)**

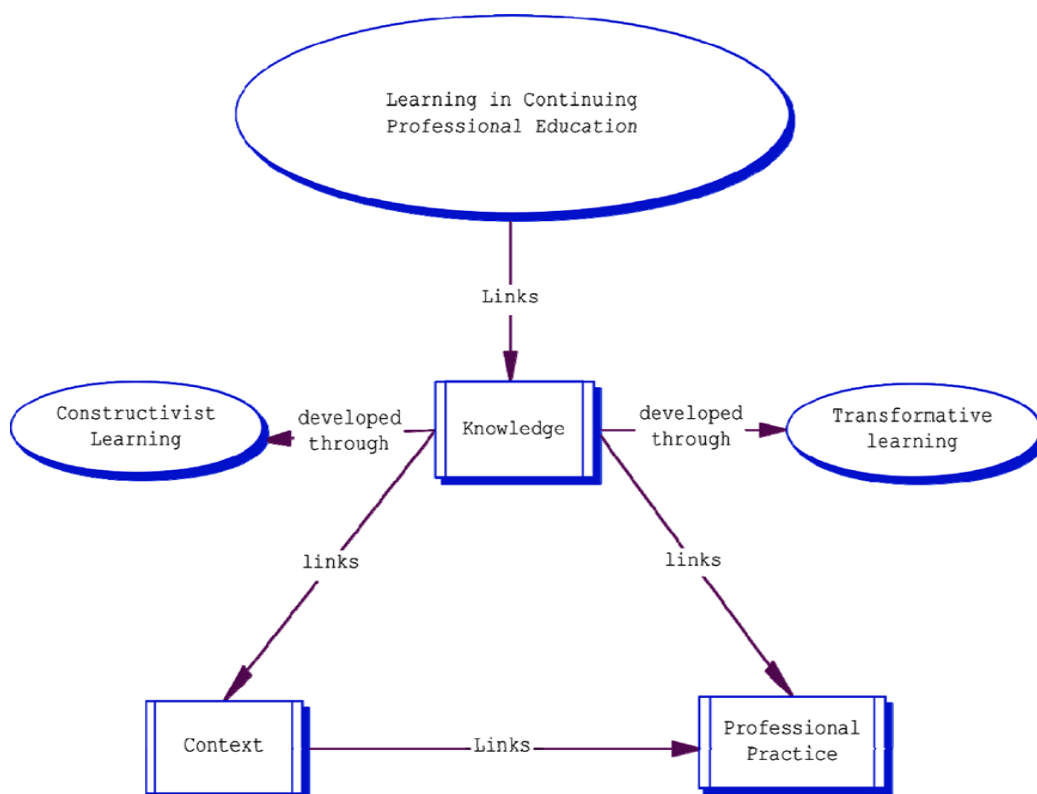
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little pieces that come from all over and in and of themselves they don't mean much, but when you put them together you have a beautiful picture. Continuing education and client care are more like that for me. I take little pieces of what I learn from many places and put them together until I have my own picture. (Daley, 2001, p. 47)

This metaphor of *creating a mosaic* depicts the process of actively constructing a knowledge base from practice.

In expanding Cervero's (1988) model of learning, we need to further develop an understanding of how knowledge is constructed, how it is linked with professional practice, and how the context affects the process (see Figure 2.1). Additionally, in newer work, Dirkx, Gilley, and Maycunich-Gilley (2004) indicated that the identity of the professional is intimately intertwined with the process of developing and sustaining knowledge for professional practice.

**Figure 2.1. Model of Learning in CPE (reprinted with permission Copyright © 2000 John Wiley & Sons)**



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