TOWARDS AN ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK FOR THE EVALUATION OF FÁILTE IRELAND'S TOURISM LEARNING NETWORK INITIATIVE

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism learning network (TLN) initiative was established by Fáilte Ireland in response to research indicating that the learning needs of the small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Irish tourism industry were not being met.[1] Indeed, feedback from the SMEs indicated that they wanted training that was "short, snappy, relevant and local"[2]. The TLNs have now been established for over two years and, although an internal assessment of each TLN is ongoing, an overall, national assessment of the TLNs has not been previously addressed until now. This is the central focus of the authors' ongoing study. This evaluation is critical in order to determine if the TLN initiative is fulfilling its strategic intent and, if not, what adaptations need to be made to the initiative's components to ensure its effectiveness. A key outcome of the authors' ongoing study is to propose a 'best practice' model for the development and maintenance of a successful TLN. A major challenge is to determine the components involved in assessing the TLNs as such a framework has not been developed prior to this. The purpose of this paper is to present the framework which has been developed for the assessment of the TLN initiative.

[1] Based on research conducted by Price Waterhouse Cooper on their behalf; further Fáilte Ireland's strategy document, *Tourism Product Development Strategy 2007-2013*, recognised that SME managers were reluctant to take part in off-the-job training and development due to time pressures and the lack of management cover in the business.

[2] Fáilte Ireland's policy document "Competing Through People: A Human Resource Development Strategy for Irish Tourism 2005-2010."

BACKGROUND TO STUDY

As indicated, based on feedback from the industry and research conducted on behalf of Fáilte Ireland, tourism learning networks were established by Fáilte Ireland in order to meet the learning needs of small to medium tourism enterprises. At the time TLNs were established, 'learning networks' was not a concept people were familiar with nor was it in common usage in the Irish tourism industry. Utilising general guidelines, thirty-three TLNs have been established in Ireland by varying types of providers (academics and/or consultants); further, providers were free to customise the learning to suit the TLN's individual participant requirements. The foregoing has resulted in a cross-standardisation of some TLN components as well as a variation between TLNs on delivery methods and other initiative components. The standard components nationwide are as follows: (1) group meetings facilitated by professional facilitators, (2) residential learning events, (3) workshops on information technology (IT), marketing and public relations (PR), (4) mentoring support from industry experts, and (5) both regional and national conference participation. The differences identified between the providers range from variations in emphasis on a particular delivery method, for example the extensive use of mentoring used by particular providers, to the use of an accreditation scheme in some of the academically backed TLNs. There are also variations between TLNs facilitated by the same provider as the course content is adapted to suit the participants in the group.

The participants, upon enrolment, complete a Development Needs Analysis[3] (DNA). This development needs analysis performs many functions:

- It makes the participant take ownership of their own learning by identifying their own key areas for development.
- It gives the provider a blueprint from which to design the most appropriate course content to match the group's needs.
- It gives the participant a reference guide to track the meeting of their needs as the course progresses.
- It involves the participant in actively reflecting on the core elements of their operation, for example, quality, people management, marketing and

[3] Development Needs Analysis is a generic term used in this context as in some TLNs this document is termed learning needs analysis and in other TLNs it is labelled training needs analysis.

promotional activities, finance and information technology (IT). This reflection also incorporates rating their understanding and identifying any gaps in their knowledge.

Although flexibility is a desirable component of the TLNs, the variant nature of the TLNs represents a particular challenge to assessing the TLN initiative. The nation-wide assessment of the TLNs will involve, to some degree, a comparison of the different methodologies, facilitation and level of compliance with Fáilte Ireland's learning outcomes. The different TLN learning models will be of particular interest when developing a 'best practice' model.

THE LEARNING NETWORK AND ITS EVALUATION

The literature indicates that the development of networks offers the small business owner-manager an opportunity to broaden the scope of their knowledge and learn from other firms; a small firm's resource poverty can be overcome through the harnessing of relational capital achieved through networking (Julien 2007). Tinsley and Lynch (2007) define a network as "a set of relationships between individuals and groups to achieve a particular purpose" (p.15) and the seminal work by Hanssen-Bauer & Snow (1996) on the establishment of Nordvest Forum, a network which focalizes learning, legitimised the concept of learning through networks. Bessant et al. (2003) describe learning as a 'by-product' of network activities and they argue that shared learning is a primary feature of practitioner learning networks. Originally, the literature identified that there were three levels of learning: the individual level, the group level, and the organisational level (Huber, 1991, Crossan et al. 1999). Kekale and Viitala (2003) propose a fourth category – that of network level learning. As learning in its most basic form involves individual learning, this level of analysis is this study's key area of interest; indeed, it is perceived that, similar to social capital

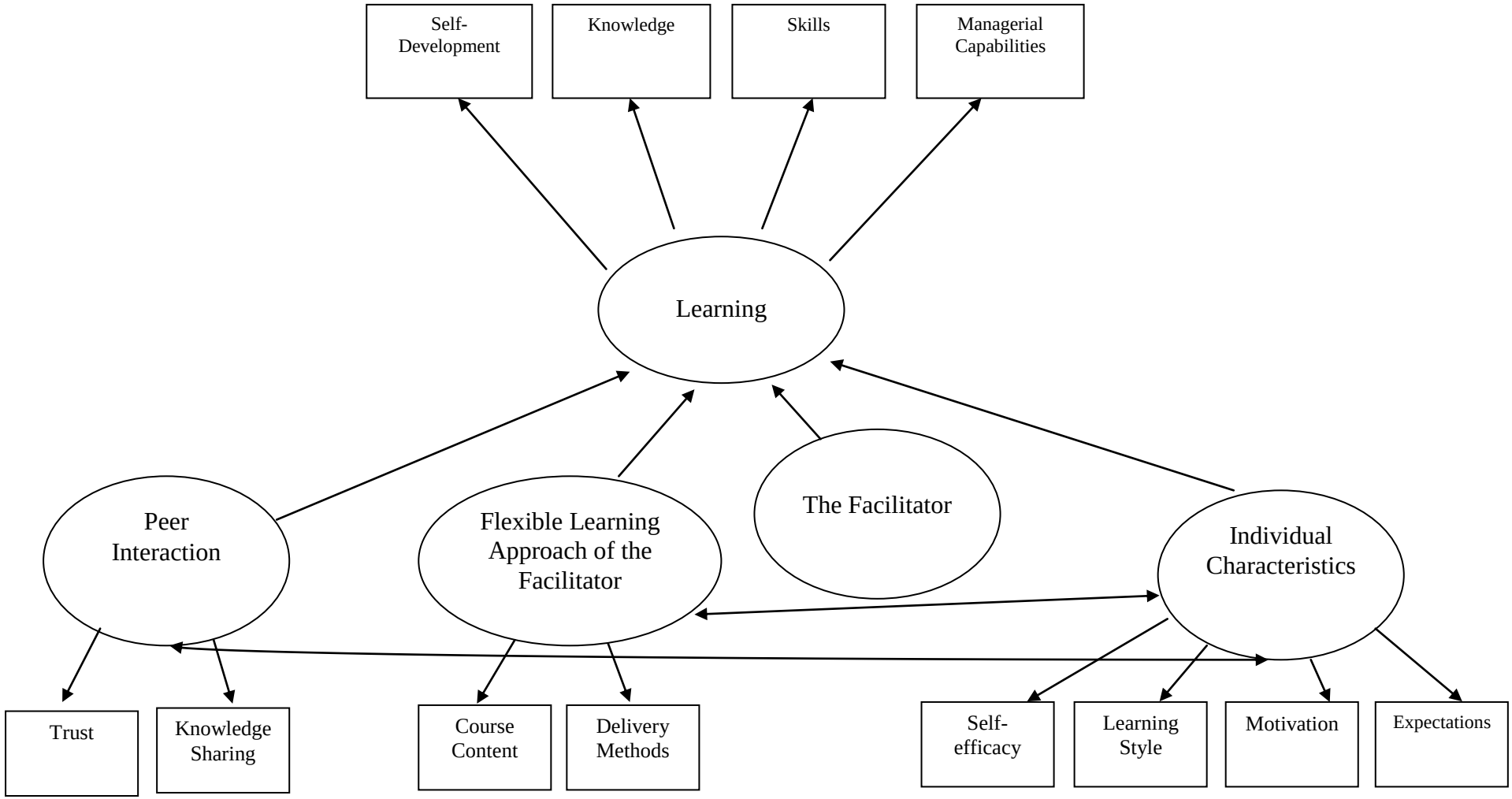

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for TLN Assessment

theory, the learning of individuals aggregates to their situated network (cf. Burt 2005, p. 44).[4]

Several major difficulties are inherent in learning network evaluation: (1) many aspects of the learning network process are intangible (Henderson 1998), (2) most of the benefits arising from the reshaping of an enterprise's capabilities are intangible (Bessant et al. 2003), and (3) research on the evaluation of learning networks is in its infancy, yet a review of the literature does indicate points of reference involving learning network outcomes, and internal and external factors (cf. McGovern 2006; Bessant et al. 2003; Tell 2000; Henderson 1998). Informed by TLN objectives (as specified by Fáilte Ireland) as well as an in-depth assessment of the literature, Figure 1 represents the conceptual framework which has been developed for the assessment of the TLN initiative. The framework highlights that it is perceived that: (1) the influence of peer interaction, flexible learning approach, facilitation, and individual characteristics are major determinants of learning, and (2) that self-development, knowledge, skills, and managerial capabilities are key learning outcomes – these variables represent measurable dimensions of learning. The following section discusses the relationship between the identified antecedents to learning and this is followed by a discussion on the major outcomes to learning in relation to the TLN.

KEY LEARNING DETERMINANTS

As previously indicated, a review of the literature highlights that the major variables that influence an individual's learning are: the characteristics of the participant, the flexible learning approach of the facilitator, the facilitator and peer interaction. The following subsections take each in turn to discuss.

Individual Characteristics

[4] It is recognised that although individual learning is a prerequisite to organisational learning, the organisation doesn't necessarily learn as a result of an individual's learning (Gould and Baldwin 2004, p. 3), however the micro-business nature of many TLN participants suggests that the individual's learning closely parallel's the enterprise's learning.

Cronbach and Snow (1977) argue that all learners are different and some of the characteristics where people differ are correlated with learning success. Further, the magnitude of the correlation may differ across samples that have had different treatments or interventions (Campbell and Kuncel, 2001). The participant characteristics of self-efficacy, motivation, expectations of learning, and learning styles have all been found to impact learning (Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992; Taylor et al.1984; Noe, 1986; Mumford, 1995).

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is seen as a central concept in social learning theory (Bandura, 1997). In a learning context, self-efficacy has been defined by Tannenbaum and Yukl (1992) as "the belief in one's ability to perform a specific task", (pg. 415) which is similar in many respects to Campbell and Kuncel's (2001) reference to self-efficacy as the belief that one can expand his or her capacity in certain domains. It has been determined that individuals with high self-efficacy tend to outperform individuals with low self-efficacy (Taylor et al. 1984; Bouffard-Bouchard 1990) and, in studies examining self-efficacy and knowledge gain, it has been found that an individual's self-efficacy influences their learning (Gist et al. 1989; Martocchio and Weber, 1992). Individuals who approach learning with the belief that they are capable of mastering course content are more likely to do so during a learning intervention (Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992). Learning, in particular through sharing of experiences, is more likely to occur when the individuals have reached a level of self-efficacy whereby they believe they have expertise to share.

The foregoing indicates that self-efficacy has an important effect on the design of the intervention, its implementation and the variety of outcomes forthcoming; further, Compeau and Higgins (1995) argue that course structuring must progressively enhance the participant's self-confidence. They further argue that self-efficacy is positively influenced by the encouragement of others, thereby suggesting there is a relationship between peer interaction and individual characteristics (see Figure 1). As well as an individual's self-efficacy, their learning style has also been identified in the literature as affecting an individual's learning.

Learning Styles

An individual's personal learning style influences their reaction to the learning intervention, primarily the learning delivery aspect and, to an extent, the course content (Garavan, 1997; Honey and Mumford, 1982). Honey and Mumford's (1982) framework classifies learning into four styles*:*

- The Activist – ready to dive right in, lives for the here and now, happiest when engrossed in difficult problems. The activist enjoys learning through competitive teamwork and business games.
- The Pragmatist – likes to see a clear link between the problem being solved and their job; realism is important to them and having clear guidelines on how to implement new ideas. This style of learner may be more engaged if the case study was of his or her own business issue.
- The Theorist – likes learning through models, frameworks and concepts; they tend to dislike ambiguity and unstructured events or activities where they feel out of tune with other participants.
- The Reflector – likes to take a step back and listen and observe; they do not want to be under time constraints, and are happiest when asked to produce carefully analysed reports.

It is important to note that an individual can use all four styles but there will usually be one dominant style that the participant is most comfortable using, i.e., a preferred learning style. Different methods of learning delivery will suit different learning styles, for example, the asynchronous nature of an online delivery increases the time available for an individual to review their learning – this would be particularly attractive to the strong reflector. Yet, in spite of the tailoring of the course to match the DNA of participants, the delivery method, speed and process will not always suit each individual all the time. Depending on the learning style, different means of delivery will appeal to different participants, and different participants will learn more or less from a module as a result. Hickcox (1995, p. 42), in discussing the design of interventions, proposes: "…seek to match the primary mode of educational delivery to the best learning style information available, and in turn apply the information most appropriately to the

intended audience". In the next section we discuss the motivation to learn as another differentiating factor which impacts on learning.

Motivation to Learn

Motivation is defined as the "direction, intensity and persistence of learning-directed behaviour in training"(Colquitt et al. 2000, p. 678) and it has been identified as one of the most important antecedents of how a participant responds to a learning intervention (Facteau et al., 1995). Motivation has been associated with positive learning outcomes in many studies (cf. Colquitt and Simmering 1998; Mathieu et al.1992; Quinones 1995) – people do not learn new behaviours when they are 'forced' (Argyris 1990) and, even though individuals may have the ability to master the learning content, where there is no motivation to learn, they may fail to do so (Noe 1986); indeed, as Bessant et al. (2003, p. 21) argue, "…learning is not automatic – there must be motivation to enter the cycle, and if there is insufficient arousal, learning may not take place." Further, Baldwin et al. (1991) in their research found that trainees who enter a learning intervention with higher motivation levels learn more and are more likely to complete the programme than their less motivated peers (confirming previous studies by: Hicks and Klimoski 1987; Williams et al. 1991; and Tannenbaum et al. 1991).

A review of the literature indicates that participants displaying higher motivation levels will engage more with the course content and delivery. Participants with higher motivation to learn will be more open to the new experience, engage in more reflection on the topics, and come to conclusions on the merits and practical implications of the learning more readily. Irrespective of the actual quality of learning intervention, participants may not be motivated if they perceive the intervention as irrelevant to their jobs or ineffective (Facteau et al., 1995). Colquitt et al. (2000) demonstrate that motivation to learn explains incremental variance in learning outcomes over and above cognitive ability. In their meta-analysis on training motivation, Colquitt et al. (2000) reveal three antecedents which directly influence the participants' motivation: self-efficacy, valence and job involvement. The valence of the learning intervention is examined later as an element of expectations of learning. Job involvement is defined as

the degree to which an individual identifies psychologically with work and the importance of work to a person's self-image (Brown, 1996; Lodahl & Kejner, 1965). As the owner-manager identity is woven strongly into their business activities (Jarvis et al. 2000), this would suggest that in order to enhance motivation to learn, course content must be relevant to the owner-manager – this is further discussed in the section on course content.

Expectations of Learning

Noe (1986) proposes that expectations of learning influence training effectiveness. Tannenbaum et al. (1991) find that trainees who have their expectations met (referred to as "training fulfilment") develop greater self-efficacy. Tannenbaum et al. (1991) examine the importance of meeting trainee expectations, and in particular the influence it has on learning outcomes.

Participant expectations are derived from a combination of different elements of what the participant believes about a course. The participants will also have expectations of the course influenced by their prior experience of formalised learning environments. Cunnington (1985) cites as problematic the clash between academic and managerial expectations in many learning interventions, highlighting the need to tailor a TLN to the participants.

Alliger et al. (1997) distinguish between two reactions to training: affective or enjoyment of the training and that of perceived usefulness or utility. Their meta-analysis findings suggest that although affective reactions do not correlate with learning, perceptions of utility do. Following on from this, there is ultimately an interest in assessing the participant's expectations of the utility of the course both for themselves and their business. Although a business owner's desire for immediately applicable learning (Crossan et al. 1999; Lawless et al. 2000) should be tempered with the need for a long-term view.

Tannenbaum and Yukl (1992) advocate that the learning process should be designed so as to enhance the participant expectations that the intervention will be successful and will lead to valued outcomes, encouraging a progression from simple to more difficult tasks as participants become more confident. The expected value of the learning outcomes in the eyes of the participant will be a factor in their reaction to the modules and their subsequent learning. Indeed, managers who believe in the value of training are more likely to apply skills learned in training (Baumgartel et al.1984).

Flexible Learning Approach of Facilitator

Rather than the traditional classroom-based teacher-centred approach, the flexible learning approach offers a variety of different delivery methods, designed to be more student-centred (Foley et al. 2007), and its structure facilitates peer-interaction and enables social learning (Bandura, 1977). Blended learning offers a mixture of face-to-face and online modules, which aims to combine the best features of the interaction between student and instructor with the advantages of asynchronous learning, and it includes different models of teaching and learning styles (Heinze and Proctor, 2004). Previous studies have examined elements of the blended learning approach and its impact on learning, such as content (Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992; Facteau et al., 1995; Ford and Wroten, 1984) and delivery (Cacioppe, 1998; Petrovic et al., 1998; Taylor & Thorpe, 2004; Garrison and Kanuka, 2004), yet a precise formula for what an optimum mix of content and delivery should be does not exist.

SME owner-managers find that a multi-faceted approach is particularly appealing, with a mixture of distance learning, face-to-face tutorship and mentoring by other mediums such as e-mails (Stokes, 2001). For example, on the TLN, the use of modules responds to owner-manager desires to keep the learning intervention "snappy", that is, meeting the time constraints' inherent to small and medium enterprises (Lange et al. 1999).

Course Content

According to Adult Learning Theory (ALT) the following must be present as part of the course content: 1) the participant must see the issue involved as important, 2) it must

involve some analysis, 3) it must involve some aspect of creativity, and 4) it must include the practical application of the suggested improvement (cf. Paauwe & Williams, 2001). Following on from this, the student-centred approach to decision-making on course content is essential, particularly in the identification of the issues of importance to the participants. The analysis advocated by ALT is in keeping with the concept of a non-prescriptive approach, encouraging the participants to learn through problem-solving (Garavan, 1997). The aspect of creativity proposed by ALT conforms with the experiential, hands-on preferences of the SME owner-manager, and encourages the participant to play an active role in their own learning and self-discovery (Piaget, 1967). As discussed previously, the participant places a high value on the utility of the course content as well as an emphasis placed on immediately applicable learning in the small firm environment, but this would need to be balanced with longer-term learning initiatives in the training.

Content is dictated by the training objectives: hence course content must reflect the knowledge, skills and patterns of choice behaviour that the participant must acquire in order to meet course objectives (Campbell and Kuncel, 2001). As discussed earlier, the findings of the DNA dictate what each provider will encompass in the course content. Further, the literature also indicates that pre-learning should be incorporated into course content in order to build on previous experience and reassure participants as to competence in context. The underlying goal is to ensure the course content helps individuals to learn rather than imposing prescribed training solutions on them (cf. Deakins & Freel, 1998; Gomez et al., 2004). Donovan et al. (2001) add that the perceived relevance of the content also encompasses the similarity of methods and materials used in the course to those used in the work environment, which will be addressed in the following section.

Delivery Methods

SME owner-managers have a strong preference for activity-based learning, as opposed to knowledge-based learning (Choueke and Armstrong, 1998), which must be taken into consideration in delivering an intervention to them. Learning-by-doing may be

particularly appropriate for ICT training given the practical nature of the content (Stokes, 2001) and the hands-on way the owner-managers operate, however, Garavan and O'Cinnéide (1994) warn that an over-reliance on activity-based learning neglects the critical aspect of reflection vital to learning, and advise building in the time for reflection as advocated by Rowntree (1992).

SME owner-managers expressed a preference for the use of mentoring and one-to-one meetings as a delivery method (O Dwyer and Ryan, 2002) followed by workshops (Lawless et al., 2000) - this has implications for the individual level of engagement and therefore learning. The range of delivery methods used as part of the flexible learning approach includes: meetings facilitated by professional facilitators, residential events, workshops on operational areas mentoring support and both regional and national conferences. The variety of methods allows for the preferences of different learning styles as discussed previously. Indeed, Stokes (2001) argues that the benefits of a mix of delivery methods are: (1) the enhancement of co-operative learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), (2) it reflects the informal on-the-job approach to learning preferred by SMEs, and (3) it accommodates the tailor-made content to suit individual needs. Thus, the facilitator should endeavour to make knowledge transfer easier (Gomez et al., 2004) by relating the delivery to the participant and their learning preferences.

The Facilitator

The importance of facilitating a suitable learning environment has been identified in previous studies as worthy of attention (McGill and Beaty, 1992; Tell and Halila, 2001). In a learning network context, Henderson (1998) and Bessant et al. (2003) state that there is a need for external facilitation, suggesting that universities or government agencies should fill this role. This need is based, in part, on participant perceptions concerning learning network legitimacy; Human & Provan, (2000) discuss the role of legitimacy as a generalized perception that the actions, activities, and structure of a network are desirable and appropriate. Further, Stokes (2001) argues that trust in the credentials of the provider and the expertise that they offer is important if the kind of cultural barriers found by Lange et al. (1999) towards continuing education and training are to be overcome.

Facilitator legitimacy is perceived to be vital in the recruitment of new members to the learning network as potential participants' perceptions of the learning network is improved through the network's association with a well-known and highly respected educational institute (Lange et al., 1999).

In respect to the TLNs, it is believed that in order for the TLN to appear on the radar to the owner-manager, a degree of legitimacy is a prerequisite and that the legitimacy of the TLN in the eyes of the participant encompasses aspects such as the visibility and reputation of the TLN. Further, it may be that the ability of the TLN to attract new members for the longer term sustainability of the programme is dependent on achieving legitimacy and working to retain it.

The facilitator role involves keeping the pace of the intervention lively, and ensuring the relevance of the new learning through references to the SMEs own business or prior learning as the course continues (Ford and Wroten, 1984; Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992). The facilitator is also there to prevent bias in a group's focus of attention, and to ensure all participants get an opportunity to have their say. Campbell (1998) warns of the power relationships between the participants of a network, and the hazard of the dominant actor setting the agenda for learning in the absence of strong facilitation. Additionally, Paloff and Pratt (1999) recommend that they act as a "gentle guide" in their role in opening up discussion arenas. The facilitator acts as the connective tissue between participants in a network, enabling them to build their trust levels. The facilitator should provide feedback as the learning progresses thereby enhancing the learning process (Komaki et al., 1980). The facilitator is vital in providing the environment for our next variable of interest, peer interaction.

Peer Interaction

Social Learning Theory suggests that individuals can learn through their own experience and through observing other people's behaviour and its consequences, this, combined with the network context, explains the criticality of peer interaction as a determinant of

learning (Bandura, 1977, 1997; Foley et al. 2007). Larson (1992) describes how friendship and information exchanges between firms are necessary prior to committing to risky business exchanges. Larson suggests that the time spent socializing is an aid to building up intuition, a key managerial strength, developed through experience and reflection. Henderson (1998), in describing a learning network meeting, describes the forum as a Trojan horse to get the participants in, and that the informal refreshments and informal interactions were vital in enabling networking – this was in recognition of the importance the informalities play in generating an atmosphere conducive to learning and sharing.

Tell (2000) argues that the following factors are necessary to the success of a learning network:

1) Level of trust.
2) Nature of participation by members.
3) Quality of the members participation.
4) The development and nature of dialog between participants.

Each of these factors can be related to peer-interaction, for example, the development of trust pivots on individuals' interactions. O'Dwyer and Ryan (2002) see the interaction between the participants on a programme as being of high importance and advocate the use of role models from within the group, for example, getting them to relate to the group their own experiences of running an SME, thereby enabling vicarious learning. Sadler-Smith (1995) propounds the effectiveness of introducing a social dimension to SME learning, reporting that SME management experience a sense of learning when they introduce the voice of others into their decision-making. Further, peer-to-peer contact on an individual basis would facilitate participants in situations where confidentiality or inhibition present difficulties within the learning set context (Foley et al. 2007). Stokes (2001) stresses the importance of creating a non-judgemental atmosphere for learning as, due to their positions, it is sometimes considered difficult for owner-managers to admit their ignorance. The TLN is built upon the concept of learning through peer interaction in addition to the formal processes of the course and its delivery. The degree of peer

interaction will be influenced by elements of the levels of trust and knowledge sharing as now discussed.

Trust

Trust is defined by Castelfranchi and Falcone (1999) as the mental counterpart of delegation, and they explore its foundation based on perceiving that trust is the belief of an individual towards another individual's potential actions and reactions. Trust, in a network context, has been dimensionalised by Colucci and Presutti (2006) as involving:

1) Sharing of common expectations and aims.
2) Lack of opportunistic behaviour.
3) Creation of common investments (commitment).
4) Development of informal relationships.

Networks are seen by Ring and Van de Ven (1994) as a means of engendering more trust and loyalty between companies than normal commercial relations. Indeed, there is a consensus in the literature that trust is a prerequisite to good relationships among a group (D'Aunno and Zuckerman 1987; Floren and Tell, 2004; Kirschner and Van Bruggen, 2004) and Social Exchange Theory (Blau 1964) and Social Penetration Theory (Altman and Taylor 1973) highlight that trust is critical to relational development. Further, Inkpen (2005) claims that a climate of trust is a critical factor in the free exchange of information. Trust plays a role in creating the right environment for the exchange of ideas and information, and the exchange of ideas and information are critical components in the learning process. In a learning context, Petrovic et al. (1988) assert that a lack of trust between people can act as a barrier to learning through networking – this can be readily understood as research has determined that the nature of the interpersonal relationship has a major impact on the breadth, depth, and quality of information shared between individuals (cf. Altman and Taylor 1973; Knapp 1984; Stohl and Redding 1987; Holden and O'Toole 2004a). Further, Floren and Tell (2004, pg. 304) state that "… trust is necessary for the development of reciprocal relations; the learning actors' receptive and confronting capacity depends on the level of trust between them; and finally, trust is the

foundation for a transparent dialogue". Indeed, as discussed next, the degree of knowledge sharing between individuals pivots on the level of trust in their relationship.

Knowledge Sharing

Learning involves the transfer of knowledge (Tsai 2001) and, as indicated by Butler et al. (2006, p.630-631), there is a general consensus in the learning literature that "trusting relationships lead to greater exchange with people more willing to give useful knowledge and more willing to listen to and absorb other's knowledge" and that "trust will determine who are the likely beneficiaries of information…". This is further supported by Tell (2000) who argues that trust is one of the major determinants of network learning processes and Huber (1991) who identifies that the processing of information, which involves knowledge acquisition, its distribution, or its interpretation is a core component of learning. High levels of trust between individuals are necessary to the transfer of proprietary and tacit knowledge (cf. Andrews and Delahaye, 2000) and, as discussed below, research shows that close interpersonal relationships, which are characterised by high levels of trust, are necessary to the transfer of proprietary and tacit knowledge (the transference of such is considered a basis of new ideas and innovation (Nooteboom, 2000)).

The network literature highlights that there are two types of knowledge: tacit (complex/relatively un-codified, and personal) and explicit knowledge (readily understood/codified, and public). In comparison to the transfer of explicit knowledge (which Hansen, 1999 argues should be relatively easy), tacit knowledge, due to its personal, cognitive nature, is highly problematic (cf. Zander and Kogut, 1995); Hansen (1999) notes that "When the knowledge being transferred is noncodified and dependent…an established strong interunit relationship between the two parties to the transfer is likely to be most beneficial. In a strong interunit tie, the source unit is likely to spend more time articulating the complex knowledge" (p. 88). Findings from Hansen (1999), Uzzi (1999) and Ingram and Roberts (2000) support Szulanski's (1996) determination that an "arduous" relationship between individuals is a major barrier to knowledge transfer as tacit knowledge is more proprietary than that exchanged in a

relationship that is not close; indeed, Andrews and Delahaye (2000) found that strong ties between individuals were necessary to sharing proprietary knowledge. From a network perspective, Szulanski (1996), drawing from Nonaka (1994), argues that the transfer of tacit knowledge requires: (1) numerous interpersonal exchanges, (2) ease of communication, and (3) closeness of the source and recipient units, which parallels the viewpoints of communication and interpersonal relationship researchers and theorists.

In addition to the above, literature from the relational communication field indicates that the nature of the interpersonal relationship has a significant impact on: (1) whether or not an individual communicates with another individual, and (2) the patterns of the interactants' communication. If low levels of trust exist in interpersonal relationships, information is distorted and poor in quality (O'Reilly et al. 1987). Distortion involves gate-keeping, summarisation, changing emphasis within a message, withholding and modifying the nature of the information (Stohl and Redding 1987). The exchange of information of superior quality occurs when the relationship is characterised by a high level of trust. Additionally, because a display of disliking by one actor to another actor would be socially unacceptable, disliking leads to withdrawal from another (Dillard et al 1999). Withdrawal can manifest itself in many ways such as infrequent, if any, communication, no feedback, the use of more formal channels, and limited knowledge sharing.

An integration of network theory with the communication and interpersonal relationship literatures indicates that although non-close interpersonal relationships (weak ties) are an efficient mechanism for the transfer of codified, public knowledge, close interpersonal relationships (strong ties) are necessary for the transfer of tacit, proprietary knowledge.

Learning

Kekale and Viitala (2003) hold that learning is fundamentally an individual activity, but learning can happen to many individuals simultaneously. Gibb (1998) suggests that learning involves the acquisition of skills, knowledge, habits and attitudes in such a way

that behaviour is modified. Adult learning theorists posit learning as being a form of self-actualization (Sahakian, 1984). Further, Alliger and Janak (1989) assert that positive reactions to a programme do not imply learning, so it is imperative to examine the wider perspective of what the programme may deliver in terms of outcomes. Additionally, Gagné (1962) argues that the most fundamental design issue is the specification of what is to be learned, even if not stated explicitly this can be inferred from what actually happens. The main outcomes of learning from the literature and Fáilte Ireland's remit are as follows: knowledge, skills, management capabilities and self-development (Alliger et al., 1997, Kraiger et al., 1993, Sahakian, 1984). Skills are seen as the building blocks of a person's capacity to undertake job-related tasks (Hinchliffe, 2002) while capabilities are focussed on the enhancement of productivity of firm resources (Makadok, 2001). In this study, the management capabilities, are identified as the dynamic capabilities which are perceived to be visible in the SME operation, for example the adoption of best practice and innovation (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000).

Knowledge

Knowledge is the subjective storage of aggregate information (Strydom, 1994) or expertise (Machlup, 1984), and is considered relative, transformable and historically transient (Lawson, 1997). At this point in the study we ask the question "What are the participants learning in terms of new knowledge, improved depth of knowledge and on what basis can we make this claim?" Powell et al. (1996, p.120) argue "Knowledge facilitates the use of other knowledge". Szulanski (1996) confirms this viewpoint and adds that the ability of the participant to value the knowledge and apply the new knowledge is the key to best practice while Inkpen (2005) proposes that knowledge needs to be leveraged across the business to create real returns and that the knowledge transfer is all about the ties between people. Further, Henderson (1998) suggests that knowledge acquisition is a key outcome of a learning network, also highlighting its importance in attracting new members to join the network. In order to define the knowledge gained through the experience of the TLN, it is necessary to refer back to the DNA.

Skills

Hinchliffe (2002) in describing skills as the foundations of the ability to complete job-tasks was just one of many authors to attempt to define skill. Acknowledging the lack of consistency in the literature on the definition of skill (Campbell and Kuncel, 2001), Green (1998, p. 28) offers a definition of skill as "the ability to perform prescribed tasks with predictable accuracy" while O'Donnell and Garavan (1997, p.131), citing Koestler (1983) and Lovell (1980), describe skills as "either innate or acquired and the key characteristic of any acquired skill is that it is learned" The major difference between the two definitions is the delineation in the latter definition that a skill must be learned. Learning involves process and Kraiger et al. (1993) define three stages in skill development: 1) initial skill acquisition, 2) skill compilation, and 3) skill automaticity. The first stage involves the transition from knowledge that is declarative to knowledge that is procedural and can involve formal instruction (Chapman and Lovell, 2006). In the second stage, compilation skills occur with continued practice beyond initial successes at reproducing the behaviour (Kraiger et al., 1993) – in this stage, skills move from being originally considered difficult and requiring energy to "… easy and automatic" (Hodgkin 1985, p. 9). Accomplishing skill mastery occurs at the third stage, skill automaticity. In this stage there is a shift from controlled to automatic processing (Schneider and Shiffrin, 1977; Shiffrin and Schneider, 1977). It is expected that the learning intervention will facilitate the completion of the skill development process, resulting in a tangible outcome: the ability to complete a job-task. Based on the question presented previously, this study will refer back to the DNA for pre-intervention information to aid in highlighting new skills acquired.

Managerial capabilities

Similar to Huber (1991), Kelliher and Henderson (2006, p.521) describe learning as the "lasting change in capability that will be applied in the workplace", hence the importance of assessing managerial capabilities as a learning outcome. Although Graves and Thomas (2004) argue that there are three components of managerial capability: management capacity composed of the human resources available, management expertise made up of the competencies available, and management processes involving the

planning and control of the business, Teece et al. (1997, p. 516) argue that the manager needs to develop dynamic capabilities whereby they 'integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments'. Further, Akwei et al. (2006, p.4) define dynamic capabilities as "a set of learned behaviours, which are fully or partially repeated resulting partly from tacit knowledge, specific organisational objectives, combination of resources and activities which brings about change". The SME owner-manager following the learning intervention should be willing to introduce changes in their business, indeed, Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) highlight that the speedy and astute use of the dynamic capabilities will lead to competitive advantage, for example, through product development, acquisition, strategic decision-making and alliancing. The question asked by this study is "What lasting changes has the SME owner-manager introduced into their business as a result of the intervention?" – identifying the dynamic capabilities adopted by the SME owner-manager following the intervention.

Personal Self Development

Honey and Povah (1986, p. 11) define self-development as "the deliberate process of learning from experience about oneself". O'Donnell and Garavan (1997, p. 131) add that the learner should experience an awareness of growth through "reflection on the processes inherent in the learning process itself, thus developing an increased sense of personal control, empowerment and autonomy". Indeed, ALT views learning as a form of self-actualisation (Sahakian, 1984) and Nordhaug (1989) perceives that an outcome of a learning intervention is "psychosocial development", for example, increased self-confidence. Further, Cacioppe's (1998) findings show that individuals find value in their own self-development. In his research, participants in over 30 leadership programs run by Curtin University consistently rate highly those activities that contribute to self-understanding.

O'Donnell and Garavan (1997) cite Vygotsky (1978) in their view that the only effective learning is that which is an advance of self-development. In essence, the learner's ability

to stand back from a situation and reflect on it in the context of past experiences enhances the learning capability of the individual and the organisation in the small firm milieu (Sullivan, 2000). Unfortunately, due to the unique resource constraints associated with a small firm setting, there is little time for reflective thought in this environment (Ballantine et al., 1998). Thus, this aspect of the learning process or cycle may be neglected, preventing cycle completion on the part of the individual owner-manager, an issue that should be overcome through the identification of self-development needs in the context of the learning network. The value placed on self-development reinforces the need to identify any changes in perceptions of the participants towards their own self-development brought about by the intervention.

CONCLUSION

In producing a framework for assessing the TLNs, the authors first examined the antecedents to learning highlighted in the literature. There is a growing appreciation of the importance of the participant's engagement in the intervention, and ALT advocates that the participant plays an active part rather than the traditional passive role. The aforementioned active participation guided the identification of individual characteristics expected to influence the learning as self-efficacy, learning styles, motivation to learn and expectations of learning. The literature also indicated that the TLN facilitator, the flexible learning approach of the facilitator and peer interaction, in particular, trust and knowledge sharing between participants, are critical antecedents.

Following examination of the intricacies of the pedagogy and the prerequisites required for the learning network to perform, particularly considering the experiential learning emphasis in the SME context (as supported by Deakins and Freel, 1998; and De Faoite et al., 2004), the intention of this study is to assess the learning of the TLN participants through identified learning outcomes. In this paper, critical learning outcomes are identified as: knowledge, skills, managerial capabilities and self-development.

Noe (1986) suggests that participation in training activities is perceived as a mode to: increase skill levels, improve job performance and elevate feeling of self worth; **t**he framework presented here guides the evaluation of the major outcomes of the intervention. It is perceived that the results of this study will inform Fáilte Ireland of a 'best practice' model for the development and maintenance of a successful TLN, and be of value to others investigating the learning process in an SME context.

It is anticipated that this study will make major contributions to both theory and practice. The major theoretical contribution of this study is to the evaluation of learning networks – research in this area is extremely scarce and even scarcer in the tourism and Irish context of this study. Results from this study will also have great practical value – the evaluation of the TLNs is critical not only to determining if Fáilte Ireland's learning initiative is fulfilling its strategic targets (and, if not, what adaptations need to be made to the initiative's components to ensure its success), but also, through the provision of a TLN 'best practice' model, provides a foundation from which to build future learning initiatives on.

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