
Assessing the benefits of learning logs

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Abstract

Looks at learning logs and their relevance in the context of self-development in organizations and in education – especially within skills development programmes.

Introduction

A learning log is a form of diary used for recording and enhancing experiential learning.

The relevance of a learning log is best seen in the context of self development. This is becoming more important as many organizations are reluctant to invest in formal training programmes. There is also increasing emphasis on the role of “managers as developers”. A learning log can be used as a method for managers to help develop their staff and to encourage learning within an organization. There is also increasing attention on the use of learning logs in education, used as a means of recording learning on placements or work-based projects or skills development programmes.

It is also a method which is very much in line with development initiatives at a national level. Evidence of learning from experience is an aspect of National Vocational Qualifications, and approaches to “crediting competence” such as that of the Management Charter Initiative (MCI). Professional bodies, such as the Institute of Personnel and Development also require members to demonstrate evidence of “continuous professional development” (CPD).

A learning log is likely to be an integral part of many training programmes in the future. It is important to understand more about the best way to use a log and whether a log suits some people more than others.

This paper reports the outcomes of a study to evaluate the use of learning logs as a means of promoting, recording and assessing personal development. Specifically, the objectives were to:

- Study the relationship between learning styles and the learning log. Would some people find the learning log easier or more beneficial than others? Because of their natural preference for reflecting, it was hypothesized that those participants with reflector learning styles would be more positive than those with other learning styles.
- Consider the effect of other influences on the process, such as managerial support. While many writers suggest that learning is a personal, individual process, others emphasize the importance of the social and environmental context. A further hypothesis, therefore, was that those learners reporting high levels of support from their manager or from other sources would be

more positive about learning logs and perhaps produce better logs than those who had less support.

- Evaluate the benefits and problems of using logs, particularly from the learner's viewpoint, but also from the manager's viewpoint.

Results will be presented in relation to these key themes. Issues concerning the use of logs for assessment purposes will also be discussed. Guidelines will also be suggested for others who may be contemplating introducing logs either in an academic or organizational context.

First, the background to learning logs is presented.

Background

Learning from experience

Learning logs are used to record and reflect on experiential learning, thus enhancing the learning process. They have been described as:

a means of tracking your development with emphasis on unstructured, informal activities" [1].

Reflection is important because:

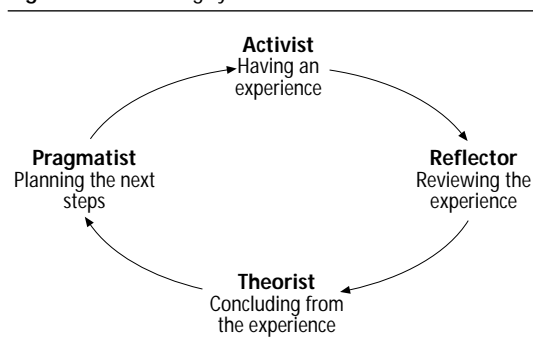
learning by reflection converts informal and accidental opportunities into more efficient learning opportunities[2].

The importance of reflection is best seen as part of the "learning cycle", described by Kolb[3] (see Figure 1).

Learning styles

Some people are naturally quite good at the reflection process. Those with a strong inclination have a "reflector" learning style. Other people, with other dominant learning styles (activists, theorists, pragmatists) may be less inclined to reflection, and so need some form of encouragement or reminder to reflect regularly.

Figure 1 The learning cycle



Honey and Mumford[4] suggest that the best way to learn *how* to learn from experience is to adopt a discipline which requires completion of all four stages in the learning cycle, and recommend keeping a "learning log". This is a means of recording and tracking personal development which encourages reflection:

The idea is that from writing up what are considered to be significant learning experiences that occur in the form of everyday incidents, the likelihood of actually doing things better in the future will be increased. In this way learning ceases to be a haphazard process, becoming conscious and learner centred[1].

The elements of a learning log, therefore, usually include:

- the creation of a personal development plan of development activities;
- a brief account of what happened;
- analysis of behaviour;
- conclusions;
- points for future action.

The log is kept for a set time with a specified number of entries or accounts of activities.

There are several key features of self development which are embodied in the learning log approach. These are: personal development planning, learner responsibility and the flexibility and individuality of the method.

Personal development planning

The importance of goal setting and development planning in managing learning has been emphasized by several writers[5,6]. This is seen as crucial to encourage individuals to take responsibility for learning and to see it as something that continues throughout life. It is only by setting goals and action plans that the learner can become proactive and gain some degree of control over the direction that development takes.

Learning from experience is too important to be left to chance[6].

Learner responsibility

Self development also requires individual commitment on an ongoing basis. This means that individuals need to take responsibility for their own learning, rather than relying on the organization/employer or leaving it in the lap of the Gods. Gibbons[7] argues that people need to be both active (rather than passive), and self-directed (rather than dependent) if they are to maximize the development potential of learning experiences. Indeed Knowles[8] suggests that adults *prefer*

self-directed learning and participation in the construction of learning events.

Individuality

“Ownership”, or taking responsibility by individuals for their own self development, is more likely if they can choose the direction and content of their development. So a prescriptive approach is unlikely to appeal to many people. Indeed, this has been a criticism levelled at certain training and development initiatives such as the Management Charter Initiative.

Voluntary or mandatory

While learner responsibility and “ownership” are important, some writers believe that self development should also be mandatory, e.g. Honey[6] and Williams[9]. Based on the assumption that people rarely do more than they need to, he asserts that learning should be mandatory and institutionalized, using a standard learning form and a system to “force” people to fill in the form and reward them for so doing. However these “rules” also have to be appropriate if they are to be accepted as beneficial. It is also important to retain some flexibility and discretion so the learning is relevant to each individual.

Features of a learning log

The key features of using a learning log then, are that it:

- recognizes the value of learning from real world experience;
- helps to complete the learning cycle and so maximize the learning from an event;
- recognizes that learning can be a very individual and personal process;
- helps to plan future development;
- reinforces individual responsibility in development;
- provides a format for recording evidence of development.

The study

The project explained in this paper was designed to evaluate systematically the use of logs and experiential learning.

It involved over 100 personnel professionals who were attending Glasgow Caledonian University on a part-time basis to study for the Diploma in Personnel Management, a professional qualification which leads to Membership of the Institute of Personnel and Development.

Particular aims were to consider:

- The relationship between learning styles and the learning log. Would some people find the learning log easier or more beneficial than others?
- The effect of external factors such as managerial support.
- Assessment issues. What can be assessed from a log? How does assessment affect the learner’s view of the log as a learning tool?
- The benefits and problems of using logs, from the learner’s viewpoint as well as the manager’s viewpoint.

Specific steps in the project were as follows:

- (1) Using guidelines, and after discussion with the workplace manager, participants prepared individual development plans for a year ahead.
- (2) The development activities were implemented by participants at their individual workplaces over a 12-month period.
- (3) Participants maintained a “log” of these activities. This was a reflective and analytical account highlighting key learning points and difficulties.
- (4) Assessment criteria were discussed and agreed between the academic tutor and participants.
- (5) The logs were finally assessed and analysed by the tutor.

It was important to use a flexible approach to allow for differences in individual ability, experience and workplace opportunity. At the same time there was a requirement that the approach adopted would have to be one which could be applied in a consistent enough manner to allow it to be assessed as part of academic and institute requirements of the diploma course.

Creating personal skills development plans

In creating personal development plans for a year ahead, participants were required to devise their *own* learning outcomes at the beginning of the programme and negotiate these with their workplace manager. Plans could be spread across a wide range of topics, or focus on a few in depth. The advantage of this approach was its flexibility, allowing each learner to design a plan to suit his or her own needs and interests as well as those of their organization. Above all, by avoiding a rigid checklist of activities, each learner’s programme would hopefully be meaningful to their current level of skills, and would be set in the relevant context of the organization.

Log format

In completing the log, participants were asked to provide:

- their learning objective for each activity;
- a brief account of what happened;
- analysis of their own reactions and behaviour;
- difficulties encountered;
- conclusions and learning points;
- points for future action.

Participant groups

There were two groups of participants, the difference being in the guidelines specified. For group 1 the guidelines were kept deliberately flexible to allow for differences in levels of experience and work opportunities. However, many of these participants expressed concern about what would be appropriate for the log, how many activities in the log was “enough” and how to complete the log. Many comments indicated a desire for more guidance and direction. It was for this reason that group 2 was given more specific guidelines. These included:

- written guidelines on how to create a personal skills development plan;
- pro-forma for drawing up the plan;
- how many skills activities to include;
- written guidelines on how to write the log or report;
- a sample of a log entry;
- assessment criteria;
- recommended time scales to follow.

Evaluation methods**Participant questionnaire**

At the end of the 12-month period of using the logs, all participants then completed individual questionnaires to gain their reactions and to identify problems with the process. (The final format of the questionnaire was devised after discussion of the key issues with a mixed sample of participants.) There was a 64 per cent response to the questionnaire.

Employers' questionnaire

Managers of these participants also completed a questionnaire survey to ascertain their views of supporting learners in this initiative. The response was 53 per cent.

Follow up

A further year after the initial part of the project, participants were issued with a follow-up questionnaire. This was to ascertain

whether (and which) participants had continued to maintain some form of personal learning log, and to gauge longer-term reactions. Responses to this were 31 per cent.

Findings

The findings are reviewed with regard to benefits and problems of keeping logs, learning styles, support for learners, and assessment issues.

Benefits of keeping a log

Participants identified a number of benefits in keeping a log. The main ones were:

- *Improved self awareness.* The chance to reflect on learning, leading to improved self awareness was mentioned by about half the respondents.
- *Opportunities.* Participants also gained access to many new opportunities and experiences at work which they might not otherwise have obtained: “it forced my employer to address some of my learning needs earlier”.
For some participants these opportunities developed into longer-term secondments, greater scope in the job or even promotion! It is apparent that the focus on self development in this project, preparing a plan and having to meet objectives and deadlines, actually opened doors for many people.
- *Professional development.* Professional development was also mentioned as a benefit by several respondents. Clearly, this has advantages for the organization as well as the individual.

Long-term benefits

An interesting finding from the follow-up study revealed a tendency for respondents to feel more positive about the benefits of a log a year later (see Table I).

Two possible reasons are suggested for this shift to a more positive feeling:

- (1) The participants, having completed their course of professional studies, felt less pressure, and could therefore see benefits more clearly than before.
- (2) The benefits of keeping a log become more apparent in the longer term.

The follow-up survey also showed that 60 per cent of respondents continued to record their development in some way. This tended to

Table I Responses to the question in the follow-up survey one year on: "Do you feel more or less positive now about the benefits of the log than you did a year ago?"

Feeling about benefits	Percentage of responses
More positive	33
Same	57
Less positive	10
<i>n</i> = 30	

have a briefer format than that used originally, as time pressures were a concern.

Benefits identified by managers

The main benefits identified by the managers of participants, given in response to an open question, are shown in Table II.

Managers therefore valued the learning log not only in aiding learning and development, but also for its role in *managing* (i.e. planning, monitoring and recording) the development of staff.

Learning style

In order to see whether people with certain learning styles were more positive than others about using logs, participants were asked if they intended to continue using some form of log, after the "mandatory" period of the project. Learning style was measured using Honey and Mumford's questionnaire [10], and the most dominant learning style was used as indicator. Results are shown in Table III. Note that there were no pure pragmatists within this group.

These results suggest that learning logs are not suited to reflectors only. Indeed theorists were most positive – perhaps the reflection "boosted" their theorizing! Activists were *least* likely to continue, by a significant amount. In the follow-up survey, however, activists were just as likely to be still recording their development in some way (although the numbers

Table III Intentions to continue using logs, by learning styles

Q. Do you think you will continue to keep using some form of log?	A. Yes (Percentage)
Activists	20
Reflectors	63
Theorists	80
Combined styles	67

here are rather small for firm conclusions to be drawn) (see Table IV).

Comments from activists also suggested that while the reflection and recording of development did not fit with their preferred mode of learning, nevertheless they did appreciate the value in these processes.

The log may be better valued by activists because it puts them into a more reflective mode, leading to more benefit all round the (learning) cycle (activist).

Support for learners

Support was important for several reasons expressed by participants. Using the learning log seemed to be a personal process and so many participants felt rather isolated. The log was not like other academic work and because it was based on personal and individual plans, it was difficult to make comparisons with other participants. Table V shows the help obtained by participants.

The main source of support was the workplace manager. The main form of this help was in giving feedback, support and guidance, (mentioned by 46 per cent of respondents). Managers also provided relevant learning opportunities (mentioned by 37 per cent of respondents). A final item mentioned was provision of time to take part in the new activities (mentioned by 15 per cent of respondents).

Support was therefore significant at the planning stage and also later in the reflection stage. There are many people who support learning activities in many different ways, but in this project with learning logs the help is focused on these two phases of the learning cycle. The importance and variety of the support obtained by participants also suggests that self development is a social, rather than a purely personal, process.

Assessment

It has been suggested that the introduction of assessment is inconsistent with the self-

Table II Benefits of logs, as identified by managers

Benefit	Percentage
Provides a record of staff development	30
Provides a focus for planning and monitoring development	27
Encourages reflection and analysis	27
Encourages self development	8
Helps match development objectives to business needs	8

Table IV "Are you recording your development in some way?" Answers in follow-up survey, related to respondents' learning styles

Answer	Learning style					Total
	Activists	Reflectors	Theorists	Pragmatists	Combination	
Yes	2	4	4	4	4	18
No	2	3	2	1	4	12

development approach inherent in a learning log, given that a log is a personal and flexible tool. Assessment, on the other hand tends to imply consistency and standardization.

Honey[6] however, has stated that self development should be mandatory. In this project participants were not "volunteers", and they would not have completed logs had it not been mandatory. Assessment was a necessary part of this mandate, to ensure participants gave it due attention.

Form of assessment

There is also the question of *what* can be assessed from a learning log. While it may be true that some learning may be assumed from the log, it was not the learning itself or levels of competence which were being measured. Rather it was the log itself, the level and detail of analysis of a range of learning experiences, which was being judged. The assessment criteria for the log were discussed and agreed with participants. These are outlined in Table VI.

Of all participants 82 per cent said that the assessment criteria were either fair or very fair (the remainder said a little unfair or very unfair). However over 90 per cent of group 1 indicated that they would have preferred more information at the outset about the assessment criteria. This was remedied with group 2. This was clearly helpful, as only 9 per cent of their group felt the need for more information at the outset.

Table V Source of practical help with development re the log

Source of support with log	Percentage response
Workplace manager	55
Another colleague at work	33
A "mentor" at work	15
A class mate	21
Tutor at university	16

n = 65

Note: Figures total more than 100 because some respondents mentioned several sources of help

Table VI Assessment criteria (percentage)

Range of activities	15
Clarity of objectives/processes	10
Level of analysis of personal learning and identification of difficulties	40
Identification of areas for future development	15
Quality of presentation	10
Tutor's discretion	10
Total	100

As indicated in Table VI, assessment focused on the written analysis in the log. It can be difficult to describe some aspects of experience and learning. Myers and David[11] discuss tacit skills which are often informal and difficult to articulate. They mention the example of maintaining balance while riding a bicycle and suggest that there is a similar difficulty in explaining intellectual components of some skills such as problem solving and decision making.

In focusing assessment on the written log only, this may be criticized in that some individuals are better able to articulate their learning experiences and communicate these to others. Some learners may simply be very good (or bad) at putting ideas into words. Such concerns about assessment have been voiced by others:

It (the assessment process) arguably means that the most important competence is the competence of writing about your competence[12].

However, these concerns are not exclusive to learning logs. They are also relevant in considering more traditional forms of assessment, such as exams or assignments in education. This problem can sometimes be avoided by adopting an assessment of competence by direct observation. This is not without its own problems, however, and was felt to be inappropriate in this study.

Flexibility/standardization

While flexibility is important in self development, participants themselves desired standards and guidelines. Those participants who had more flexibility (in group 1) found that

this created uncertainty and anxiety. This was the reason for giving more specific guidance to group 2. This seems to have been worthwhile in that participants of the second group showed marked differences to the first group in several respects (see Table VII).

Many more of the second group reported that they had enough information to create their plans, how to write the logs and how these would be assessed. They felt more positive about the benefits of creating a plan, and more positive about logs overall. Detailed guidance therefore seems to be essential, while at the same time allowing flexibility in the areas or activities to be developed.

Assessment outcomes – learning styles

The log results were analysed and correlated with a variety of other factors. It was hypothesized that certain people might be predisposed to using a log to aid their self development (“reflectors”) and that this might be reflected in better marks. While statistical analysis to correlate grades and learning styles was precluded by small numbers involved, inspection of the figures indicates that reflectors were slightly better than others (see Table VIII).

Effects of support on assessment

Some participants felt that the idea of an individual, personal log, being assessed by the university was unfair as people would have different levels of opportunity and support at the workplace. The final grades awarded for logs were compared with the levels of support recorded by participants. Those learners who received help from their manager at work did not seem to do better overall than those who did not receive manager’s help.

Table VII Summary of responses from group 1 and group 2 using logs

Question	Response	Response
	(percentage)	(percentage)
	Group 1	Group 2
Did you receive enough information about:		
how to plan?	18 (yes)	84 (yes)
what to put in your plan?	47 (yes)	90 (yes)
assessment criteria?	9 (yes)	80 (yes)
how to write the log?	12 (yes)	62 (yes)
How beneficial was it for you to create a plan?		
very beneficial	18	24
quite beneficial	35	45
of limited benefit	38	31
of no benefit	9	0

Table VIII Participants’ learning styles and assessed grades of logs

	Reflector	Theorist	Activist	Combined	Total
Top two grades	27	2	10	10	49
Middle two grades	2	10	10	20	42
Lower three grades	2	2	–	5	9
Total	31	14	20	35	100

Note: Figures presented as percentages of total

Relating log results to other sources of help at the workplace and at the university, e.g. colleagues, mentors, tutors, also had no apparent effect on grades. Some participants who reported no help had top grades and some with lots of support gained only marginal or average grades. While help did not impact on grades, it nevertheless had an impact on participants’ feelings and reactions while using the log, with those participants who had management support feeling less anxious about the process.

Age, gender, and job function were also correlated with log marks (separately). Analysis showed that none of these had any effect on results.

There were, however, significant correlations between log grades and grades for each of the three final exam results for the course. Participants who did well in the log also did well in exams. (It should be noted that different people were assessors for the logs and for the exams.) This seems to reinforce the idea that it is individual motivation and effort that is important rather than just support from others, or better opportunities[7].

Discussion

Benefits

This study has shown that with careful planning, guidance and support, both learners and managers can derive benefits from using logs.

For learners, the benefits are that learning logs help the reflection process, enhancing learning by completing the phases of the learning “cycle”. With good planning and involvement of managers in the planning process the use of logs can also lead to wider opportunities and experiences, which is surely one of the most desirable aspects of development. This whole process of improved learning processes and wider opportunity then improves professional development, which is advantageous for both individuals and

employers. This means that learning logs are worth considering for organizations as well as individuals as a means of self development.

Perhaps learning logs will see their biggest increase in use in education. In this particular study, the context was personnel management education. The Institute of Personnel and Development (IPD), which is the professional organization for human resource and training professionals, in common with other professional bodies, has a stated requirement for members to engage in “continuous professional development” (CPD). Evidence of CPD will be required for continued IPD membership as well as for upgrading applications. With this in mind, the institute therefore advises both current and prospective members to record their development using a learning log approach. Education centres who provide programmes in personnel management education which incorporate a learning log into their programmes will therefore establish good practice early in students’ careers. To do this at this stage can ensure that some of the necessary support and guidance can be provided by tutors. Other business and management tutors may also find logs beneficial to include as part of their programmes. They are a very useful and flexible way of encouraging students to focus on experiential learning gained in work based placements or on sandwich courses. Others have found them invaluable in relation to skills development on academic programmes, where the more traditional forms of assessment, of “knowledge”, are inadequate. As more students become familiar with learning logs, these may then become an accepted practice with employers too.

Learning styles

In terms of learning styles, while reflectors may find that keeping a log suits their preferred learning style more, almost everyone can benefit. Activists do seem to be much less positive than others about the benefits of using logs. However it may be the activists and pragmatists who stand to gain most from using a log. One approach (the easy approach?) to self development is to choose those methods which “fit” with the preferred learning style. In this case it is easy to see that the learning log would not “fit” the preferred style of activists and pragmatists.

The alternative, however, albeit tougher and more demanding, is to address those aspects of the self which are least developed; to seek out the uncomfortable, the challenging in an effort

to reap more real gain from the self development process[13].

Therefore, because the processes involved in using a learning log *complement* the preferred style of activists rather than fit with them, these may be the very people who should be encouraged to try using a log.

Support and guidance

Given that activists and pragmatists are likely to find the use of logs difficult at first, this makes the issue of good support more crucial. Using a log can be a lonely sort of activity, and support is important for everyone, but especially for activists and pragmatists.

This support and guidance can be in the form of:

- clear guidelines to follow on how to complete a log;
- help with planning and obtaining development opportunities;
- clear information early on as to how it will be judged; and
- being able to discuss progress with someone, either a manager, colleague, peer or tutor.

Additional guidelines are highlighted in the Appendix.

Assessment

The format of a log which is required for assessment purposes may not best suit the learners themselves. Learners tend to prefer a simple form of note keeping. In deciding to introduce logs, therefore, developers must consider the interests of both learners and assessors – this will determine the acceptability and usefulness to learners. There is a risk that assessment can alter the “ownership” of the log if it is perceived to be for the benefit of assessors rather than the learners themselves. The benefits identified by managers in this study were not the same as those emphasized by participants. The managers identified the main benefit of logs as a means of “recording” development, for structuring and planning development, and for appraisal purposes within the organization. These were mentioned more often than the log’s value in aiding actual learning.

The format of logs which is most appropriate for one purpose (for assessment) may not be appropriate for the other (for learners). If learners are expected to take ownership of logs as a self-development tool, then this may not happen if the prime purpose of the logs is

for assessment. It seems then that deciding “who and what the learning log is for” is a crucial question for management developers, and it is important to ensure that the learners’ own interests are protected.

From the management perspective, the use of a log can provide a format for planning, recording and monitoring of staff development. It offers a tool which is flexible enough to be adapted by different organizations and it is personal to each individual. It can be used by the individual to focus the managers attention on his or her development needs as well as a means of demonstrating achievement. With responsive individuals, it can also lead to more communication and in turn, more positive relationships between individuals and managers.

So there are substantial potential benefits to be gained. These benefits may not be readily apparent. Initially the use of a log may seem like more of a burden than anything else. The benefits are only likely to become evident after a period of time using the log. It is therefore no quick fix, easy approach to development, but an approach which requires careful, planned management and commitment. But like anything worthwhile, “there are no gains without pains”.

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Appendix: guidelines

For organizations or institutions which are considering implementing learning logs:

- Explain the rationale and guidelines to learners at the outset.
- Provide written guidelines on how to create a personal development plan.
- Provide a pro-forma for drawing up the plan.
- Allow the plan to be personal to each individual.
- Ensure that learners understand that the plan is for guidance – it can be adjusted to take into account unforeseen situations.
- Give an indication of how many “entries” to include.
- Nominate a contact person for discussion and support.
- Give written guidelines on how to write the log or report.
- Give a sample of a well written log entry.
- Provide assessment criteria in advance.
- Recommend time scales to follow.
- Encourage learners to write up the log on a regular basis.
- Read a sample log entry for each participant and provide feedback early in the programme.
- Be aware that individual participants with specific difficulties such as job changes, organizational changes or spells of unemployment may need additional support.