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Facilitating workplace learning and change: Lessons learned from the lectores in pre-war cigar factories

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Lessons learned from the lectores in pre-war cigar factories

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to describe the lectores (readers) who read the world news and works of literature to workers in pre-World War II cigar factories in Tampa, Florida, and in New York City. The paper addresses the need for more examination of some neglected aspects of workplace learning by presenting a more critical approach to workplace learning as a form of social change. It also focuses on the importance of the lectores' role as facilitators of workplace learning and leaders of change.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on a qualitative analysis of archival data from libraries and research centers located in New York City and in Miami, Florida.

Findings – Through the lectores, cigar factories were a place where workplace learning, organizational and social change occurred daily. As leaders, the lectores were radical agents of change and created affordances that shaped the factory workers' workplace and personal learning. The discussion explores the dynamics between the lectores and the cigar workers.

Practical implications – Findings from this study demonstrate that developing employees is not limited to elevating their knowledge and skills needed to increase productivity and organizational performance. As self-actualized employees are better contributors to organizations, they, along with facilitators of learning, must care about what workers intrinsically need and explicitly demand. The findings speak to the multifaceted nature of workplace learning, one that encompasses skill acquisition and one that transforms workers. In essence, learning facilitators elicit change.

Originality/value – The research literature on workplace learning in the early part of the twentieth century in the USA is rare. This historical data-driven examination of the lectores and their role in factories presents a unique opportunity to focus on issues of social justice that are largely absent from human resource development discourse.

Keywords Management history, Human resource management, Workplace learning, Career development

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Introduction

You know what Victor Hugo say? In all towns, in every place, they have a school teacher. And in every room, the school teacher is the light. He lights the candle. But in every town the

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> preachers, the priests, they try to blow away the light. That's why they, the church, the owner don't want the reader. The reader lights the candle. It was a good thing (Mormino and Pozzetta, 1993, p. 6).

The mid-1880s to late 1920s was a time of rapid industrial development and increased worker productivity. It was also a period of high demand and high production of handmade cigars in the USA. Most of the US cigar factories were located in areas of New York City and in the Ybor City neighborhood of Tampa, Florida, where the majority of factory work was taken on by immigrants of Cuba and Puerto Rico. The tobacco industry started to flourish in the 1880s and attracted Cuban and Spanish immigrant workers (Lastra, 2006) who hired readers, also known as lectores. Lectores read aloud to workers the news and works of literature and shaped a workforce that was socially conscious and politically powerful (Mohor, 2005). As Coult (1952) states, every cigar factory had lectores:

> From a platform or rostrum fixed for the purpose, he reads to the workers, while they work, the daily papers, the most popular magazines, and books which are requested by the workers themselves (p. 32).

The lectores, paid by the workers themselves (rarely by the factory owners), entertained while instilling discipline and timing (Tinajero, 2010). They were also significantly responsible for a cause-and-effect relationship between themselves and the cigar rollers, wherein the workers became more educated and politically astute through listening to political and literary material that resulted in worker unionization as well as social and political change (Hernandez, 2013).

An examination of the lectores and their role in the workplace presents a unique opportunity to focus on issues of social justice that have largely been absent from human resource development (HRD) discourse (Bierema and Cseh, 2003; Fenwick, 2005). If one considers that HRD is a fairly new field and originated from a more positivist and quantitative framework, there is a need to add examples of historical perspectives to existing scholarship and practice to delve more deeply into the social phenomenon in HRD. As such, we address perspectives on workplace learning (Fenwick, 2004; Foley, 2001) with Billett's (2001, 2004) argument that workplace learning is co-participative and based in social practices to address the pre-World War II (WWII) era workplace of cigar factories.

Taking the pre-WWII cigar factories as its context and data from libraries, archives and media sources, the purpose of this paper is to better understand how the lectores served as facilitators of workplace learning by shaping the learning opportunities and sparking social justice activism among cigar rollers and the larger community. Specially, we ask about the role of the lectores (readers) who read the world news and works of literature to workers in pre-WWII cigar factories in Tampa, Florida.

To answer this question, we discuss how the influence and role of the lectores resulted in a strong and more empowered workforce that mobilized for historic change. This historical case demonstrates that respected leadership, with a high regard for learning, can have a profound impact on the way workplace learning is valued and organized. The result is the apparent juxtaposition with commonly accepted notions of workplace learning in today's organizations, where leadership and learning are frequently inflexible and historically entrenched. We conclude by discussing the contemporary relevance of such cases for HRD practitioners in the twenty-first century, as it reveals the inherent value of the facilitator–

learner relationship in workplace learning and the organizational variables of motivation, job satisfaction and engagement.

Review of literature

Learning has been described as a part of everyday work practices (Streumer, 2006), and according to Gustavsson (2009) and others (Li *et al.*, 2009), it is being given increased attention. Learning in the workplace, whether formal, informal or non-formal, involves employees acquiring knowledge, skills or attitudes that change both the current and future performance or professional achievements of the learners (Doyle *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, workplace learning emphasizes learning about the nature of work, the impacting contextual factors and the essential features of the broader social environment including time and place (Taylor, 2001). Thus, an understanding of both the workplace and the concept of learning offers a way of examining the potential for change processes (Foley, 2001; Willmott, 1997) that are exemplified in the case presented in this study.

Facilitating learning in the workplace

Informal learning is defined by Lohman (2005) as involving those learning activities that employees initiate in the workplace, including the expenditure of physical, cognitive, or emotional effort, and result in the development of knowledge and skills – usually work-related. Similarly, Jacobs and Park's (2009) conceptual framework of workplace learning includes on the job or unstructured, active learning. Besides informal learning, organizations may support or simply serve as sites (intentionally or otherwise) for non-formal learning. This learning is largely an individual process derived from a person's own will (Fordham, 1993) or is a by-product of a more organized event. In addition, akin to non-formal learning is individual human development, where the learning is intended for developing individuals, not producing skills or innovation for an organization (Jacobs and Washington, 2003). According to Marsick and Watkins (1990), organizations can support these types of learning through culture, policy or specific procedures that are largely derived from social interaction.

As Eraut (2000) and Murphy and Young (1995) posited, we learn from social interactions, which oftentimes are precipitated or result in change. This is supported by Ellström (2001) who defines workplace learning as changes in work practices brought on by both individual learning and organizational-level problem-solving processes. More specifically, change involves a questioning of one's assumptions and a fundamental rethinking of premises, and this is often aided through relationships with teachers or facilitators. These facilitators, or learning partners (Poell and van Voerkom, 2011; Ellinger *et al.*, 2011), help individuals become critically reflective and to think for themselves – capable of taking action and changing the world (Brookfield, 1995). Learning facilitators (Salomon and Perkins, 1998) have recently drawn attention from researchers (Nielsen and Kvale, 2006; Poell *et al.*, 2006), and there is a growing body of research looking at managerial coaches (Beattie *et al.*, 2014). Whether a manager, a peer or an outside consultant, learning facilitators play an essential role in the development of employee. They explicitly and implicitly help individuals to improve their performance and enhance their personal growth and development (Hamlin *et al.*, 2008).

Learning as a community

Most of the learning done in groups, such as shift workers or in labor unions, speaks to the relationship between agency and self. In particular, research in critical workplace learning that Fenwick (2007, p. 315) described as promoting "more just, equitable, life-giving and sustainable work conditions" highlights the informal working class communities where the learning of working-class women and men develop through a common group orientation to create agencies of knowledge and emancipatory potential (Sawchuk, 2003). Meaningful change through workplace learning is also explored by Billett *et al.* (2005), as they address the transformation of work through a continuous process of engagement and interaction in learning.

This sociocultural constructivist view is based on the notions that knowledge is socially mediated and that, therefore, "close social mediation or proximal guidance is likely to provide an expedient means for learners to access and construct conceptual knowledge" (Billett and Rose, 1996, p. 204). This view emphasizes that the learning process is constructed by the learner through a close interaction between individuals requiring social mediation, negotiation and appropriation (Pea, 1993). The result is often a collaboratively constructed common set of beliefs, meanings and understandings that are shared in the process of work (Pea, 1993), as well as through a culture or a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Communities of practice are popular platforms for organizations seeking to manage the human and social aspects of knowledge creation and dissemination and improve human performance and are defined by it as "an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their community" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 98).

Some scholars may argue that unions serve as a community of practice (Ball, 2003; Harvey *et al.*, 2013). Labor unions are defined by educational and learning practices, union culture and the everyday workplace struggles of members (Martin, 1995). Moreover, Dubinsky and Raskin (1977) describe organized labor as historically providing an important site to develop learning that allows workers to collectively question mechanisms of control in the workplace and position themselves within labor divisions and capital structures.

As a community, the labor union supports what Billett (2004) describes as an interdependent processes where workers are able to exercise their independent agency through the relationship between the learners and the facilitator, the relationship between the learners and their union and the relationship between the facilitator and the union (Newman, 1993). Besides the USA, this beginning of the century union movement was also occurring simultaneously in several European countries such as England and Sweden (Jansson, 2013; Taylor, 2001).

Although workers are often constrained in what they can learn in the workplace, in the learning decisions they can make and the influence they can demonstrate (Gee *et al.*, 1996), Lave (1993) and others (Billett, 2004; Rogoff, 1995) contend that there is no separating learning from the engagement of thinking and acting in the workplace. Consequently, workers are continuously remaking and transforming their practice (Billett *et al.*, 2005) and theorizing from their experiences, which is consistent with our understandings of transformational learning. In transformational learning, a perspective transformation occurs from a powerful experience either gradually or over

time that changes the way individuals see themselves and the world (Clark, 1993). Historical examples of such transformation in the workplace are limited.

Research purpose

Bierema and Cseh (2003) contend that human resource and HRD have not given significant attention to issues of workplace learning conditions, including power and diversity. Elliott and Turnbull (2003, p. 971) are concerned that:

> […] the methodological traditions that guide the majority of HRD research do not allow researchers to engage in studies that challenge the predominately performative and learning-outcome focus of the HRD field.

This study sought to address these criticisms by expanding current research in workplace learning and providing a depth of understanding of workers' experiences in pre-WWII cigar factories. Specifically, we focus on the lectores and asked how did their role as "readers" served as a form of workplace learning for cigar rollers?

Methods

This illustrative case is descriptive and intended to add historical context and new perspectives to our understanding of workplace learning. Illustrative cases are primarily used to describe what phenomenon is happening and why, and can aid in the interpretation of other data or theory. Case studies offer "a nuanced view of reality" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223) that calls for a more inclusive definition of research validity. As Thomas (2010) notes, case study can stand on its own, but we acknowledge and agree with Ruddin (2006) that generalizing from a case study is personal in that the reader is charged with making her or his own comparisons in order to assess the transferability of findings.

Influenced by previous historical research in adult education (i.e. Boshier and Huang, 2010; Guy and Brookfield, 2009; Walter, 2007) and spurred on by the call from Kopp *et al.* (2010) for more critical inquiry through examination of the social history of adult education and workplace learning, we used an inductive approach that examined the work and leadership of lectores in pre-war cigar factories. Drawing from the work of Rocco *et al.* (1998), who used fiction and non-fiction as data sources, and Bowl and Tobias (2012), who used published sources and contemporary accounts, the data were gathered by the first author from post-1880 primary (English-written documents and artifacts from first-hand experiences) and secondary (reports by those without direct experience) sources housed at the New York Public Library, The New York Center for Puerto Rican Studies, the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College (SUNY), the New York Hispanic Society and the archives and the library of The University of Miami, Florida. The search was aided by archivists and libraries at these sites. It began with a search of all materials matching a term search of lector, lectores and cigar. This resulted in the identification of contemporary and archived interviews and oral histories, newspaper articles, films and radio programs and a review of previous research on the lectores for 34 unique data sources; all of which were in English or included English translations.

All data were given basic descriptive categories to organize data by primary/secondary label, document/artifact label, date of creation, purpose and creator. These were entered into a database for analysis. The database allowed the authors easy access to all data during analysis and interpretation. The data were initially read and

coded by the first author using an inductive method (Thomas, 2006) of content analysis. This required the documenting and understanding of how meaning was communicated, as well as the verification of possible theoretical relationships (Altheide, 1987) through an open coding of all the data. That data and accompanying codes were aligned by all the authors to determine properties of subsequent category. Those categories were then reduced to three conceptual themes that addressed the research question and purpose.

A challenge for historical, qualitative research such as this is its inherently small and context-specific sample. This is exacerbated by a researcher's inability to "fully understand the experience of another person" (Patton, 2005, p. 227) as well as the idea that no single reality exist on which inquiry may converge, rather there are multiple realities that are socially constructed (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). Despite this, trustworthiness can attended to support the argument that research findings are "worth paying attention to" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 290). To do this, we sought to provide the rich historical context for readers, thus allowing them to determine for themselves if similarity between the context we present and another context is sufficient (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Moreover, triangulation of data sources was used to cross-validate the data, improve accuracy and comment on the plausibility of the findings (Denzin, 1978). Triangulation involved the first author and then, subsequently, the other two authors, using the multiple data sources for comparison and cross-checking of events involving the lectores, experiences of cigar workers during the time period and accounts about and from the lectores. We recognize that historical evidence such as ours is often interpreted with a contemporary lens; thus, later, in the analysis process, our triangulation included independent analysis of emerging themes.

Findings

The cigar factory as both a space for learning, as well as social equity and engagement, emerged as central to the experience of the workers (Gutiérez Días, 1975; Sporn, 2007). We found that the dominant form of workplace learning was reading by the lectores, where workers were "willing to listen for hours, days, and sometimes weeks while the reader turned the pages of the history book, a political treatise, or a novel" (Sariego, 2003, p. 173). This deep listening transformed the daily work life of cigar rollers by occupying an intellectual space that was emotionally generative. Colón (1961, p.161) indicates that the lectora (the lecture itself) was able to, through their readings, "enchant and instruct", in a tone that was both "defiant and resonant" while creating a high degree of participation (Sariego, 2003). This form of informal workplace learning was a central part of cigar workers' life. It gave them the opportunity to learn for its own sake, rather than focusing on the demands imposed by the outside world.

The historical story of the lectores and the cigar factory workers in pre-WWII ultimately revealed three distinct, but connected themes (see Table AI) that have contemporary relevance. First, the cigar factories were a context for workplace learning that engage the mind of workers. Second, the lectores were facilitators of learning. Finally, the lectores acted as facilitators for social change initiated through a unique form of workplace learning

Workplace learning engaged the minds of workers

At its most basic level, the lectores read from a variety of materials to engage the workers' minds. The reading of serialized novels was often used by the lectores and

stimulated the workers' collective imagination, provided sheer entertainment and taught life lessons.

According to Sariego (2003, p. 184):

> Cigar makers would settle into what could become two weeks, perhaps a month, of rapt attention to some of the most acclaimed literature on the planet, as well as the not so acclaimed. And all the while, they rolled some of the finest cigars around.

As Kramer (1990) wrote, the cigar rollers were entertained and informed as they worked by the lectores who read from books and newspapers, and "for his part, the reader could claim toll from his listeners, in order that his piecework pay would not suffer" (Robert, 1949, p. 174). Reading alleviated workers' boredom, as Stubbs (1985, p. 98) writes: "Martinez endeavored to bring la lectura to fellow cigar workers to alleviate the tedium induced by the individualized nature of the labor". Vega (1984, p. 22) further documented that:

> […] the readings were most often from books by Gustave LeBon, Ludwig Buchner, Darwin, Marx, Engels, Bakunon […] And let me tell you, I never knew a single *tabaquero* [cigar maker] who fell asleep.

Cruz (2003b, p. 24) adds that:

> Cigar workers were able to escape the monotony of manual labor through literary reveries […]. To pause over a few lines of a book and share human emotion can bring a sense of consolation and alleviate reality.

One author wrote of an exchange between the lector and the workers that demonstrates how the lectores engaged workers' minds and left them wanting more:

> I'm not going to tell you, he'd say. Until tomorrow. Por favor, Senor Aparicio! The cigarmakers would plead. No, Manuel Aparicio would tell him firmly. Manana. The workers couldn't wait to come to work the next day! (Sariego, 2003, p. 117).

Further:

> […] the factory owners, in their quest for profits, tolerated what they considered to be the harmless practice of la lectura de tabaqueria [reading], convinced that workers lulled by the sounds of the reader would produce more cigars (Sariego, 2003, p. 95).

One worker "admitted that the only time he could stand working in the factory was when the reader was reading" (Yglesias, 1971, p. 92).

Although the lectores appeared to serve as entertainment, in reality, they took on the role of helping learners become critically reflective and to think of themselves as individuals capable of taking action and changing the world (Brookfield, 1995). The relationship between the lectores and workers originated in the workplace and satisfied the safety, welfare and social needs of its members through a sense of belonging while bringing together a group of individuals who communicate and share a common goal. Although the lectores served as facilitators of learning in the workplace, they held no power over the cigar rollers. Instead, the workers were the arbiters of the hiring, firing and work life of the lectores (Gutiérez Días, 1975). As such, the workers placed high demands on the lectores and made choices regarding what was read to them as they worked including texts on politics and labor, literature and even great medieval epic poems. Throughout the historical accounts of the factories, diversity of the lectores'

reading content was noted as was the influence of those readings on workers. Their sense of self as learners, workers, activists and community members was influenced through this interdependent relationship.

The lectores were facilitators of learning

The relationship between the lectores and workers extended adaptive learning and provided the space for creative learning. However, it would not be accurate to categorize the lector as just a reader. She or he had multiple "unofficial" roles, foremost was that of educator and facilitator of learning. This included "reading aloud and from time to time speaking to his companions, addressing them from the tribuna [platform], to argue with them, and all those things that naturally occur in the shops" (La Aurora, April 22, 1866, as quoted in Rivero Muñiz, 1951, p. 248). Yglesias (1971) describes the significance of the lectores and helping workers see themselves as learners:

> Oh, I cannot tell you how important they [the lectores] were, how much they taught us. Especially an illiterate boy like me. To them we owe particularly our sense of the class struggle (p. 207).

He continued, "I regretted not having continued in school and admitted that the only time he could stand working in the factory was when the reader was reading" (p. 92).

Through la lectura, communities of cigar workers were entertained, educated and developed class solidarity (Sporn, 2007), and they embraced learning. A piece called "The Library Looks at the Puerto Ricans" demonstrates the scholarly inclinations of some cigar rollers and their and familiarity with the public libraries, both extensions of the *lector's* influence (Sariego, 2003, p. 73). Thanks to the lectores, the workers of Ybor City became educated, even though some of them could not read. "A guy that rolls a cigar could have equal weight intellectually with a guy that wrote for the news papers because they were so well educated by the lectors" (Nelson and Silva, 1999). The lectores knew the latest current events taking place in the country and in the world. They also became acquainted with world literature of importance. As Sariego (2003, p. 88) noted, "The figures do suggest greater reading and writing skills in cigar workers than the North American industrialists ever suspected". In the *lectura* (lecture) circle, literacy was a dynamic and shared experience of intellectuals, workers and community (Sariego, 2003). Furthermore, "Cigar workers found the texts to be instructional, using them to learn how to read" (Gladys Sliker, as quoted in Sariego, 2003, p. 189). In the reading rooms of [the] library, workers were continuing and expanding the studies they had begun by listening to their factory lector" (Sariego, 2003, p. 192).

Moreover, "the workers also consider the reader an encyclopedia. When they have a question about a certain word, or a phrase, the author of the book, they call us" (Sporn, 2007). The lector "represented a world of knowledge that cigar makers wished to embrace" (Sariego, 2003, p. 139). Cigar rollers would often have an encyclopedia by their work station if the necessity arose to clarify a particular point (Colón, 1975) and further new learning for the workers. "The lectura was itself a veritable system of education dealing with a variety of subject including politics, labor, literature, and international relations" (Gutiérez Días, 1975, p. 448).

Although there are no evidence that the lectores had any effect on the workers' literacy increase, the 1907-1910 US Immigration Commission Reports concluded that:

> 93 per cent of the adult, foreign-born Spanish, Cubans, and Italians in Ybor City in Tampa who had resided in the USA for at least 10 years could read and write in their native language (Mormino and Pozzetta, 1993, p. 26; The US Immigration Commission Reports (1907-1910); UNESCO, 1953).

It is possible that four decades of la lectura practice (1880-1930) might have had a cumulative impact on literacy in the cigar enclave. It is, therefore, reasonable to believe that part of the increase in literacy in the Tampa area was also the result of the lectura. It is likely that the legacy of the lectores was related to the reportedly large increase in *habaneros* (cigar makers) who could read (Sariego, 2003).

The lectores were not only revered for their erudition and "facility with words" (Yglesias, 1971, p. 208), but the world of ideas and culture were so important to these workers that piecework, in this circumstance, was not seen as exploitative but rather as a means for workers to work at their pace while engaging in more valuable intellectual and cultural pursuits (Vega, 1984). Piecework, then, was made manageable or bearable by the reader who inspired and cultivated the life of the mind. Colón (1975) noted that this was one of the few instances in which piecework became a means of social enrichment and where intellectual and cultural discussions were paramount in the lives of the workers. The far-reaching intellectual stimulation evoked critical thinking, dialectical discussion and debate amongst the workers. Perez (1975, p. 66) cites editor Algie Simmons who remarked that the cigar makers perceived themselves as a "race of philosophers". Vega (1984) and others (Cruz, 2003a) concur that the dialectical exchange facilitated by the lectores created an intellectually charged atmosphere in which workers began to actively transform their everyday experience and the world through ideas and discussion. Colón (1975) notes:

> This was hardly a passive undertaking as cigar workers often engaged in heated discussion groups after the reading […]. Concerns over philosophical points sometimes were considered of far greater significance for cigar workers, whom would often have an encyclopedia by their work station if the necessity arose to clarify a particular point.

The lectores were great motivators and initiators of workplace learning, and the "cigar makers even in the smallest shops were clamoring for the lectura to be initiated amongst them" (Sariego, 2003, p. 100). "The reading material […] provided political and literary information that yielded self-education", thus influencing the workers (Tinajero, 2010). Sporn (2007) noted that "This initial foundation of the cigar factory created a workforce that was more informed, more prepared, and more organized".

The lectores were facilitators of social change

The lectores were vehicles for workplace learning that not only helped workers claim an intensely lived life of the mind but also actually served to engage the workers in ways that inevitably contributed to the demise of the lectores and traditional cigar factories. As Nelson and Silva (1999) point out:

> Here is a man, day in day out: he gives up information on political decisions to be made. He shows you how you in the USA are in charge, called a vote by this continuous harping on Jefferson and democracy. He changed the lives of these mass workers.

Events that occurred in Cuba, Spain and the Ybor City neighborhood of Tampa, Florida, from the 1880s until the late 1920s, were elicited by the workers, and la lectura became "the bedrock of the workers' struggle for independence". Cuba had ended the Ten Years'

War in 1878 – the first in a series of wars declaring Cuban independence from colonial Spain – and many Cubans and Spanish ex-patriots fled or were exiled, landing first in *Cayo Hueso*, then moving northwest to Tampa (Maatta, 2011).

Empowerment and social justice were complements of the workplace learning facilitated by the lectores through their concern for developing cigar makers to their fullest potential. The lectores had a strong set of internal values and ideals and were effective at motivating workers to act in ways that support the greater good rather than self-interests, a trait often found in transformational leaders (Kuhnert, 1994; Northouse, 2012). They set out to empower cigar workers and nurture them in change. Some lectores promised their fellow cigar makers that "the enormous step being taken in their self-education would help lift them from the darkness in which they were submerged, and begin to remove the 'iron mantle' oppressing them" (Sariego, 2003, p. 28). Moreover, Sariego (2003, p. 148) noted that "the political and intellectual power of the lector to inspire hearts and minds […]. Their readings and their teachings were stones by a pond of knowledge that, when thrown, produced ever widening ripples of insights and empowerment in the cigar community".

By the end of the nineteenth century, workers in Tampa "were learning to apply anarchist theory to their labor struggle with the help of the lector" (Sariego, 2003, p. 187). The information gleaned from the lector's readings helped to organize workers (Sariego, 2003, p. 211), and the lector's voice was also:

> […] beginning to carry a message of radical change intended to organize workers into a force to be reckoned with, as well as a change that will organize the struggle for Cuban national sovereignty (Portuondo, 1961, p. 80).

For example, "Luisa Capetillo's work in Tampa, both as lectora and labor organizer, had a significant impact of women workers in the cigar factories; the 1916 Wildcat Strike for higher pay initiated by female tobacco strippers from Lozano and Sidelo Cigar Company provides evidence" (Hewitt, 2001, p. 222). The actions of such lectores was a clear threat to cigar manufacturers who "were anxious to undercut worker control of the industry that manifested itself in strikes, increasing unionization, and the *lectura* custom that fueled both […]" (Sariego, 2003, p. 187).

The lectore "was afforded great respect and exercised numerous roles in the *tabaquero* enclaves, from public speaker to actor, and from political or labor activist to even mayor" (Sariego, 2003, p. 234). Lectores, such as Capetillo, became strong role models and strong activists (Sariego, 2003), and some cigar rollers followed their political path. Workers began to inhabit a politicized social platform, and factory owners were increasingly threatened by the lectores, as they were perceived as contributing to political unrest. "It was the voices and words of these lectores – before radio and mechanization – who informed, organized, and incited the cigar workers" (NPR.org, 2004).

The lectores became the "speaking personality, the speaking consciousness" of the people (Holquist and Emerson, 1981, p. 434), and "In all the great strikes in Tampa, the reader was at the center. The reader became a lightning rod for controversy a scapegoat in times of political turmoil" (Nelson and Silva, 1999). The lectores were perceived by cigar factory management as "converting once docile laborers into active subjects striving to transform their conditions of work and life" (Sariego, 2003, p. 120), and the lectores themselves "became strong voices in the cigar community […]" as well as "the ultimate weapon of defense for workers: the strike" (as quoted in Sariego, 2003, p. 84). With many of the lectores considered

social and political activists, and cigar manufacturers concerned about the issue of Cuban independence prior to 1898, the learning facilitated by the lectores morphed into the battle cry for social justice heeded by José Martí who termed the cigar reader platforms "advanced pulpits of liberty" (Sporn, 2007).

Lectores such as Luisa Capetillo's organizing work in Tampa had a significant impact on women workers in the cigar factories when women initiated a strike in 1916 calling for higher pay (Hewitt, 2001).

Author Nilo Cruz's (2003) work eloquently emphasizes the effects of the lector and his or her readings on the personal lives of workers. The lectores would prove to be an educational and strategic linchpin, holding cigar workers together through the flow of ideas and enabling them to move forward in their political and economic agendas. Notwithstanding the social hierarchy of the cigar industry, the lectores was heard by all. The democracy of the lectura institution lay in the ability of all workers to have access to the lectore's voice bellowing throughout the factory and, hence, exposing all to the new ideas of social change in which the lector-leader was a key player. Although the lectores was charged and credited with changing the lives of cigar workers (Nelson and Silva, 1999), an end to the tradition in Tampa was finalized when labor and managers in Ybor City agreed to end a bitter strike. The workers were forced to agree to the removal of all lectores (Spirit of Cigar City Krewe, 2014). This took place in other factories in the US factories through the early 1930s, when the lectores were slowly replaced by radios.

Before the end of the lectores, the cigar rollers, through hard experience and the lector's voice, came to abandon the reformist romantic view of artisans as the "honored class", formulating, rather, a more vigorous proletarian class-consciousness, which enabled them to organize and fight for independence as well as collective labor rights (Portuondo, 1961, p. 77). The monotony of rolling cigar after cigar was dispelled and facilitated by the lectores and led to a concerted effort for social change. The search for meaning in the eclectic and international reading of the news developed into a search for justice and fairness in their human existence.

Discussion

HRD is a field that values reflective practice (Grieves, 2003; Yorks, 2005), and the historical examination of the cigar factories' attempts at workplace learning present an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which the lectores facilitated learning by addressing, honoring and invigorating the minds of workers and working as agents of radical change in the workplace. The tension between the workplace requirements and context, the engagement and the excitement that was engendered by the lectores, selected by the workers themselves, presented a unique opportunity to examine a historical case that expands and informs our understanding of learning in the workplace.

Workplace learning

Central to the manner, in which workplace learning was integrated in cigar rolling factories, is an understanding of the inherent nature of workplace as described pertinently by Ellström (2001, p. 2): "Workplace learning is defined as changes in work practices that are mediated through individual learning and organizational problem-solving processes". His conceptual framework applies to both relational and organizational context factors. The relationship between the workers and lectores, and the context of the cigar factories, which served as the occupational locales, both

contributed to change. Ellström delineates levels of workplace learning and contends that the highest level is that of "creative learning" (p. 3), which:

> […] occurs when individuals or groups of individuals within an organization begin to question established definitions of problems or objectives and to act to transform institutionalized ideologies, structures, or practices (p. 3).

In other words, workplace learning is based in practice and everyday actions (Billett, 2004; Fenwick, 2004, 2010) and is a process of change that is, according to Fenwick (2010), social and interactive, as well as intertwined with individuals' work identities and self-perception.

Garavan *et al.* (2002, p. 61) addresses this implied change in the both the worker and workplace through the following definition:

> Workplace learning is a set of processes which occur within specific organisational contexts and focus on acquiring and assimilating an integrated cluster of knowledge, skills, values and feelings that result in individuals and teams refocusing and fundamentally changing their behaviour.

The cigar factories intended to maintain a high standard of production by appeasing workers with the lectores. Yet, those lectores fostered radical change in the workers (Hernandez, 2013).

As this case demonstrates, it is not sufficient to lump all learning in the workplace under a single unified heading. Portions of Jacobs and Park's (2009) conceptual framework of workplace learning along with Lohman's (2005) definition of informal learning which describes those learning activities that employees initiate in the workplace, along with Jacob and Washington's (2003) notion of individual human development are more consistent with the workplace learning experience of the cigar workers. Contemporary HRD is informed and reminded of the relevance of integrating learning and work through a reflective paradigm that is experienced individually, but often within a collective space. The body of work that clearly delineates the value of self-directed learning paradigms (Brookfield, 1995; Marsick, 1988; Marsick and Watkins, 1990) is magnified by the story of the cigar factories of the past and instructive of the workplaces of the future. Historically, HRD (and human resource, in general) practitioners have tended to ignore informal modes of learning in the workplace (Swanson and Holton, 2009). This may be due in part to the difficulty in distinguishing between working and learning (Koopmans *et al.*, 2006), but as Billett (2001) contends, the two are interrelated. He goes on to note that central to understanding these learning environments is investigating and defining how organizations afford learning opportunities and how individuals choose to engage in that learning with the support and guidance of the organization.

The ability of individuals to learn is increasingly being seen as an important competence (Matthews and Candy, 1999). Because informal workplace learning can be encouraged by an organization (Marsick and Watkins, 1990), it is possible to nurture a context (learning climate) conducive to it through HRD strategy choices of "devoted informal learning" and "empowered informal learning" with the former focusing on the development of human capital and the latter on the development of social capital (Mankin and Cohen, 2004). In this way, the organization is introducing what Yorks (2005, p. 156) refers to as "facilitated informal learning", thus facilitating employees to take more responsibility for their own learning (Ellinger, 2004), much like the cigar workers.

An interdependent relationship leading to empowerment

The case of the lectores in pre-WWII cigar factories captures the critical relationship between learner and facilitator, as well as the hidden curriculum of "unintended participation and unintentional learning in workplace" (Billett, 2004, p. 314). The dyadic relationship of lectores/cigar workers is an example of how affordances are harnessed by workers and supported through informal learning relationships. The symbiotic relationship between the lectores and workers reinforces what HRD professionals already know: learning facilitator skills play a vital role in the development of an organization and of its employees. As Eraut (2000) and Murphy and Young (1995) posited, we learn from social interactions including peers, partners and others. The lectores became learning partners (Poell and van Voerkom, 2011; Ellinger *et al.*, 2011). The cigar workers had opportunities to decide about aspects of the learning process, which is essential to self-directed learning (Murphy and Young, 1995).

Moreover, as the case of the lectores and cigar rollers point out, informal learning in the form of reading by the lectores addressed problems of low motivation (Stewart and Tansley, 2002) and fostered beneficial relationships that developed the individual workers through social interactive learning. The case of the lectores is further supported by Beattie's (2006) study of voluntary organizations. She found that like the lectores, the principal manager behaviors including caring (being approachable, supportive, reassuring, encouraging and so on), informing (sharing knowledge), being professional (acting as a role model), advising (coaching, counseling and guiding), assessing (providing feedback and identifying development needs), thinking (reflecting) and empowering (demonstrating trust and delegating) fostered developmental relationships.

In contrast to formal training, informal and non-formal workplace learning occurs in situations that are not usually intended for learning, most notably in the actual work setting. As a result, informal learning is said to call on and require a blending of individual difference constructs such as intellectual curiosity, self-directedness and self-efficacy (Beckett and Hager, 2002). Through the lectura and the lectores, cigar factories were a place where workplace learning, organizational change and social change occurred. The lectores represent a rich case of workplace learning in action, with particular importance for furthering critical human resource/HRD, and a gap that Swanson and Holton (2009) claims exists in popular theoretical paradigms, namely, critical social science. The stories, biographies and writings, by and about the lectores, solidify their place as agitators and organizational leaders that fought beside the cigar workers for labor changes (Sariego, 2003) and offer a rich, historical example for HRD practitioners of critical approaches to learning.

Limitations of the study

This study does have some limitations. First, it is based on the qualitative data available at the locations explored, and at time, this paper was written. Other significant primary and secondary sources may be available in other archival sites in other cities. Moreover, in some cases, the archival nature of the data prevents us from following-up with those who provided it. Despite the limitations, this historical research, and in particular, the description of the lectores' role in shaping learning in pre-WWII cigar factories, informs scholars and practitioners on the importance of informal learning in the workplace. Drawn from historical documents, this research highlights the importance of learning in today's workplaces and provides historical and early contextualized evidence of

facilitating workplace learning. As such, we hope that it illustrates how learning can be focused for change and improvement, as well as helping us better understand and possibly improve the practice of workplace learning.

Implications for practice

HRD can learn two important constructs *vis-à-vis* this glimpse into this historic place and time. The participation by the workers in the hiring, choice of reading and even construction and placement of the lector's stand illustrate the inherent value of collective participation in the decision-making process that determines the learning activities. Facilitators often develop relationships with each member of the group that they teach. This research informs the HRD professionals about the primacy of the relationships in the development of human resources. The immediacy of interaction between the lectores and the workers was facilitated by the presence and the availability of the lectores as a source of information, knowledge and clarification of any questions, as well as provocateurs and evocateurs of both emotions and intellectual life. The workers' needs sustained the relationship, and the inter-dependent relationship was clearly articulated by both the workers and the lectores. Relationships in organizations that are similar to this phenomenon are rare. This case illustrates the tremendous value and power of the human relationship to affect meaningful workplace learning, as well as qualitative, sustainable change and employee empowerment.

In the cigar factories, employee empowerment came in two forms: the participation of the workers in the selection of the lectores and in the lectores' highlighting of the cigar workers' social conditions and the trust they placed in workers to change those conditions. Recognition of the importance of these factors can prevent imposed learning in the workplace that may not be effective. Although we do not prescribe that employees make the sole decisions about what training they need or want, we point out the importance, for instance, of feedback about the relevance of training and learning materials. The influence of the lectores on the workers reminds us of the influence organizational trainers can have on workers' professional and personal growth.

This historical case shows that informal workplace learning can be a rich source of learning that is directly related to the employee's job. It illustrates the contemporary relevance for HRD practitioners in the twenty-first century because it reveals the inherent value of the facilitator–learner relationship on organizational variables such as motivation, job satisfaction and engagement. As Hyman (2002, p. 7) states, learning from the past can open up new ways of thinking and acting that can encourage us to reconsider or even "abandon once comfortable routines and search for new directions". Examples from history remind us how important it is to provide workers with choices and to provide empowerment opportunities, which can be transformative for workers and have a significant societal impact.

Future research should investigate inconspicuous ways workers learn via learning communities, especially when these are used to supplement formal training. Scholars interested in the role the lectores played in cigar factories should lead ethnographic studies in Cuba, where most of the remaining cigar factories are located, to learn about the extent of the lectores' legacy. Other studies should be initiated in places where the facilitation of informal workplace learning may have inconspicuously taken place, such as workplaces where a supervisor, manager or leader may have had a transformative role. For instance, researchers should investigate the role of union leaders in factories from the eighteenth

century or the role of migrant workers' leaders who are known to have been the initiators of workers' movements in the 1950s. For instance, Dolores Huerta became one of the founders of the Stockton chapter of the Community Service Organization (CSO). The CSO worked to improve social and economic conditions for farm workers and to fight discrimination. In 1960, she also created Agricultural Workers Association through which she lobbied politicians on issues such as allowing migrant workers without citizenship to receive public assistance and pensions and creating a Spanish-language voting ballot and driver's tests (*Dolores Huerta Biography*, 2015).

Conclusion

This paper describes the lectores (readers) who read the world news and works of literature to workers in pre-WWII cigar factories in Tampa, Florida, and in New York City; it explores their role as facilitators of workplace learning and leaders of change. The paper addresses the need for more examination of under-researched aspects of workplace learning by presenting a more critical approach to workplace learning as a form of social change, along with focusing on the importance of learning facilitators.

The lectores of the US cigar factories prior to WWII had multiple roles in their workplace and the same can be said for facilitators of learning in today's organizations. By examining this context and time in history, we see that the cigar workers of the late 1880s inform and can even inspire HRD professionals to provide leadership in new ways for challenging time. Human resource trainers shall be reminded that employee development can come from formal and incidental training, but a large part comes from informal and incidental sources, such as from peers and individuals in leadership positions. Developing employees does not solely mean formal training that brings them up to par on the skills needed to increase organizational performance and productivity; it also means attending to their development as "whole" persons (Hoover *et al.*, 2010; Rogers, 1995). Hence, the preparation of facilitators needs to also focus on their roles as developers. As self-actualized employees are better contributors to organizations, both organizations and facilitators of learning must care about what workers intrinsically need and explicitly demand (Maslow, 1973; Savickas, 2013).

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Further reading

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Appendix

Table AI.
Themes derived from the data

Theme	Examples from the data
Workplace learning engaged the mind of workers	"The workers also consider the reader an encyclopedia. When they have a question about a certain word, or a phrase, the author of the book, they call us" (Sporn, 2007)
	"The world of ideas and culture were so important to these workers, that piece work, in this circumstance, was not seen as exploitative, but rather a means where workers could work at their pace while engaging in more valuable and intellectual and cultural pursuits" (Vega, 1984)
The lectores were facilitators of learning	"The *lectura* was itself a veritable system of education dealing with a variety of subject including politics, labor, literature, and international relations" (Gutiérez Días, 1975, p. 448)
	"A guy that rolls a cigar could have equal weight intellectually with a guy that wrote for the news papers because they were so well educated by the lectors" (Nelson and Silva, 1999)
The lectores were facilitators of social change	"It was the voices and words of these lectores - before radio and mechanization, who informed, organized, and incited the cigar workers" (NPR.org, 2004)
	"To them [the *lectores*] we owe particularly our sense of the class struggle" (Yglesias, 1971, p. 207)

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