

# Learning amongst Generation Y entrepreneurs (GYE) in the South African manufacturing sector: a grounded theory!

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## Abstract

Entrepreneurship plays an important role in developing countries where unemployment among the young population is high. How entrepreneurs learn is an ongoing debate that is receiving much attention. South Africa (SA) has high levels of youth unemployment, and entrepreneurship provides opportunities for self-employment that can be supported with enhanced knowledge of contextually appropriate learning and transfer of learning. This study aimed to develop a theoretical understanding of how learning transfer occurs among Generation Y entrepreneurs in the South African manufacturing sector. The study followed a classic grounded theory methodology; primary and secondary interviews were utilised as data. The grounded theory principles of simultaneous data collection and analysis, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, saturation, and theory development were observed. The study found that GYE acquire and transfer learning in and through relationships with various role players. Learning is a continuous process that occurs passively, actively, formally, informally, intentionally, and unintentionally. Sources of learning include family, friends, peers, academic institutions, entrepreneurial ecosystems, self-reflection, assessments, mentors, customers, and suppliers through reading, audio-visual, and other materials. A Theory of Relational Learning Transfer has been proposed to account for the learning transfer phenomenon investigated here. The findings of this study may be factored into entrepreneurship curricula and provide input to practitioners running business ventures. Entrepreneurs, policymakers, and educational institutions can use the findings to improve learning transfer processes and outcomes.

*Keywords:* Learning, learning transfer, generation y, entrepreneur, manufacturing sector, grounded theory, South Africa

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## 1. Introduction

South Africa is a developing country experiencing many challenges, including high unemployment levels among youth. SA's unemployment was 32.9% in the first quarter of 2023, among the world's highest; among youth, unemployment was 62.1% in Q1 of 2023. Entrepreneurship has been identified as one of the avenues that can increase self-employment opportunities and thus help decrease unemployment levels. Understanding how entrepreneurs learn has been a subject of interest to researchers for decades (Politis, 2005; Rae, 2000; Vinke, Orhei, & Nandram, 2013; Wang & Chugh, 2014). The availability of technology to enhance learning adds a dynamic to the subject. The generation y cohort constitutes the majority of people who are currently in active employment, and understanding how they conduct themselves as entrepreneurs is important for practitioners, policymakers, and educators as it could add to the solutions required to improve levels of self-employment and decrease the unemployment levels among young people.

## 2. Research Methodology

The study was conducted using Glaser's classic grounded theory (GCGT) methodology, which was chosen for the following reasons (Rieger, 2019; Urquhart, 2016):

- It captures social processes and behavioural patterns in social interactions; this study is about a social process/phenomenon.
- It was appropriate to respond to the research question.
- It effectively discovered the participants' main concerns and how they handled their circumstances.
- Because the literature was not consulted before data collection, theory emerged from data, not pre-existing knowledge. The literature was only consulted after the data had been analysed.
- The openness to dealing with data also provides more chances to discover something new.

Data was collected from Generation Y entrepreneurs in the manufacturing sector through interviews and accessing pre-recorded interviews that were available on the Internet. Consistent with the grounded theory methodology, data collection and analysis simultaneously utilised constant comparison. Data was collected and analysed until no new concepts emerged, demonstrating saturation. A theory was developed to explain how GYE acquired learning.

### 3. Findings and discussion

Learning as a lasting change in behaviour occurs due to practice or experience, without minimising the contribution related to the wisdom that comes with age or maturity. GYE are young people who do not have the benefit of wisdom that comes with age but depend mostly on practice or trial and error to make decisions. Learning transfer by GYE is displayed in skills, knowledge and attitudes in the work context (Raemdonck, Gijbels, & Van Groen, 2014). Learning from a behaviourist perspective is demonstrated when there is a change in the frequency and rate at which behaviour occurs due to environmental factors; learning is viewed as observable changes in behaviour (Stewart, 2021). The behaviourist perspective overlooks the role of internal processes within an individual to explain the learning phenomenon. Thus, the behaviourist perspective cannot fully account for how learning transfer occurs among GYE (Murtonen, Gruber, & Lehtinen, 2017).

The social learning theory and the social cognition view acknowledge that thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and values influence learning; they further recognise the role of interaction between individuals and the environment in the learning process (Stewart, 2021). GYE's attitudes, values and belief system assisted them in pursuing their enterprise goals, and their interaction with the environment helped them transfer their learning. Humanist theorists support this proactive behaviour and emphasise the importance of the learner assuming primary responsibility for learning (Stewart, 2021). GYE take the initiative to learn as the success of their business is dependent on the commitment to education.

Poell (2014) indicates challenges in how the concept of learning is utilised as it reflects both a process and a product, which sometimes makes it ambiguous. Data showed that most of the learning is from informal sources; for example, families, peers, entrepreneurial ecosystems, the Internet, reading, research, mentors, and coaches and observing others. GYE are open to all forms of learning, whether formal or informal, in the workplace that will help them address their main concern of staying in business and being sustainable.

Most GYEs learn through trial and error, and such experiences become the basis for future learning. In that regard, learning transfer becomes risky and costly, so many potential entrepreneurs get lost. This experience was mentioned as shared by one of the participants who indicated that when the DTI initiated the entrepreneurship-sponsored programme, many young programme participants fell out through a lack of mentorship and other support structures that should have given support during difficult times. GYE need role models and support networks to learn from; it would be useful for government regulators and educational institutions to implement

programmes to enhance entrepreneurship knowledge and exposure among young people in South Africa to encourage them to follow the entrepreneurship path.

*Research* - GYE are operating in the manufacturing sector, which requires more innovation. They reported that they rely on research to understand the sector and keep up with developments in their industry. They indicated they do a lot of self-directed learning as they make efforts to search the Internet for information that will help them improve their manufacturing knowledge and make informed decisions. Research entails a systematic study and targeted analysis of sources and materials to gain an understanding or find solutions (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). GYE examine and explore issues, products, and business ideas and concepts.

*Entrepreneurial ecosystems* form part of the important sources of learning. The entrepreneurial ecosystem provides a platform for innovation, employment, and productivity growth; it refers to a process where opportunities for new goods and services are crafted, explored, exploited, and evaluated (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021). The entrepreneurial ecosystem highlights the role of social context in allowing or restricting entrepreneurship (Acs, Autio, & Szerb, 2014). Nguyen (2020) found that the ecosystem impacts entrepreneurial self-efficacy. Stam and Van de Ven (2021) state that there are strong interrelationships among ecosystem elements that fit the systems thinking perspective. This talks to institutions like Innovation Hub who provide space for GYE to pilot their business ventures and provide mentors, funding, and networks. The South African private sector industry also contributes to entrepreneurial ecosystems by providing financing for scaling. GYE indicated that they learn a lot from ecosystems as it allows for exposure and networks from different perspectives to create environments that aim to foster innovation-based enterprises. Elsewhere in Africa, Ahmad and Lee (2016) found that the sources of learning in the Ethiopian manufacturing sector were experience, social networks, innovation, and allocation. Enhanced learning transfer levels occur in entrepreneurial ecosystems that facilitate interaction and collaboration; mutual trust and relational norms also improve learning transfer (Jones & Ratten, 2021).

*Peer learning* refers to acquiring knowledge and skills with and from active engagements among companions, helping and supporting each other through challenges (David, 2014; Topping, 2005). Peer learning may occur vicariously or directly and can happen explicitly and deliberately. GYE form groups of peers to share ideas, consider challenges, and develop solutions; they learn from each other's experiences, preparing them to deal with their challenges when required (Bergman & McMullen, 2022). They even developed platforms using podcasts and other social media platforms where they can encourage each other and talk about their products.

The various ways that GYE acquire learning include:  
*Reading* – they read a great deal, and this reading helps reshape their perspectives on general issues and life. They use lessons from reading to empower themselves to

respond to the environment around them. They learn about how other entrepreneurs have survived in the industry and how as entrepreneurs, they can impact the communities around them; this type of information cannot be acquired in a formal classroom setting. GYE use reading as a knowledge source for developing resilience and developing responses to challenges presented by entrepreneurial activities (Manning, Stokes, Tarba, & Rodgers, 2020).

*Studying-* GYE reported that they enrol for workshops or short-term courses to learn about topics such as finance and human resources; this is the knowledge required to run their day-to-day operations. However, as innovators, they usually lack these management skills.

*Piloting-* GYE indicated that they learn through self-discovery via experimentation in their homes to test products before taking them out.

*Experience, Reflection and Self-assessment* regarding their experiences. GYE indicated that they learn mostly through trial and error as pioneers. They utilise the experience and lessons learned to chart the way forward, influencing their decision-making processes (Helyer, 2015). GYE look at the past so they do not make or repeat the same mistakes. Reflecting helps them to examine their thoughts and feelings, thus enhancing their self-awareness. Reflection facilitates personal and professional growth and improves the transfer of learning (Wain, 2017).

*Family* is an important resource for improving motivation and persistence (Dabney, Chakraverty, & Tai, 2013). Some of the GYE reported that they started selling products at a young age because their families were in sales. They were encouraged to explore, which allowed them to learn the basic principles of entrepreneurship. They reported that they learned how to negotiate and develop a critical mindset from families; these lessons later became essential to run their businesses (Lambert et al., 2010). Collaboration with academic institutions presented a source of learning as they provided information on the latest and most advanced manufacturing technologies. Institutions were seen more as part of collaboration than GYE going to tertiary institutions to pursue their postgraduate qualifications or as part of studies for formal qualifications. This collaboration with academic institutions is bidirectional, as the relationship permits input and feedback to flow from either side (Pillay & Barnard, 2019).

Lave and Wenger (2004) and Wenger (2010) highlighted the importance of a community of practice for learning to occur, and they identified community of practice as the unifying concept emerging from situated learning research. They argued that learning occurs within a community as part of a culture or way of doing things by a particular group. They introduced the concept of legitimate peripheral participation.

Although they emphasise the issue of participation or practice, they do not distinguish whether the community assumes the practice or is based on agreed-upon rules. This study observed that the GYE practises are not always based on agreed-upon rules but are sometimes assumed.

Learning can be defined from various perspectives, such as behaviourist, cognitive and constructivist perspectives. Brockett and Hiemstra (2018) and Poell (2013) emphasised two areas:

- Learning as a by-product of working or incidental learning
- Self-initiated learning is an intentional, conscious pursuit on the part of the learner.

Wenger (2010) described how employees learn on the job as situated learning. Most of the GYE indicated that most never had any entrepreneur training. Workplace learning can be viewed to include experiential learning and reflective practice.

Workplace learning includes work activities that may happen on the job or at an off-the-job training event Felstead, Fuller, Jewson, and Unwin (2009). It is sometimes difficult to differentiate between workplace learning and daily work. However, Poell and Van Woerkom (2011) refer to workplace learning as a natural and autonomous process inherent in social interaction that may be implicit and derived from characteristics of the work process. It is interesting to note that in this definition, no reference is made to the workplace as a physical place.

GYE learned from their previous places of employment, and that knowledge became valuable in their day-to-day conduct in their business enterprises. Informal self-directed learning transfer is not taught and involves creativity Lemmetty and Collin (2020). GYE create new modes of procedures, activities, products, and practises to navigate their environment and ensure that they remain afloat or their enterprises are sustainable; this learning transfer may be planned or unplanned, intentional or unintentional, or based on tacit experiences (Raemdonck et al., 2014). Informal learning is often triggered by work activities and personal interactions whose primary goal is not learning (Kyndt & Beusaert, 2017). Informal learning transfer is an inductive process of action, reflective, incidental, linked to the learning of others, and influenced by others. GYE often stated that when interacting with peers, customers, retailers, investors, and regulators, they realised that these engagements contributed to their learning process. However, that was not the primary objective.

Informal learning encompasses behaviour and activities in pursuit of knowledge and skill outside formally designated learning contexts (Cerasoli et al., 2018). This explanation denotes that informal learning is not always incidental/accidental but sometimes a well-calculated move on the part of the learner, self-directed and intentional. GYE identified internet websites as one of their main sources of learning; they indicated they deliberately search for information from the Internet to learn

information already available out there about products, marketing, and previous lessons to make decisions.

Workplace learning transfer is generally affected by characteristics such as learner motivation to implement what was learned, supervisors, climate, and the organisation of work (Poell, 2014). A distinction can be made between work-based learning and workplace learning. In contrast, work-based learning refers to learning in a work setting as part of a formal education programme; workplace learning is said to exist in all workplaces or communities of practice. The issue of interest is how this manifest (Marsick & Watkins, 2015; Milligan, Littlejohn, & Margaryan, 2014; Poell, 2014). There is an agreement among certain authors that the workplace, to a certain extent, is incidental, and people exposed to a situation will learn things in a new way (Billett, 2020; Marsick & Watkins, 2015). Workplaces are sometimes criticised for being poorly equipped for learning as they lack time, space, and social structure, such as coaching and support. GYE, as owners of their business enterprises, have to organise their own support and coaching processes as part of the social structure.

Zhou and Brown (2015) enhanced Kolb's learning cycle by incorporating the environment, subjective stimuli, emotional incentives, disruptive experience, expected experience, and conceptualising. The current study identified common factors with the original and enhanced learning cycle, such as experience, critical reflection, active experimentation, the environment, and conceptualising. However, the current study expands on the role played by self, peers and groups referred to as the entrepreneurial ecosystem as pivotal in the learning and learning transfer process.

#### **4. Key Participants and their role in the learning transfer process**

GYE themselves are the key participants in the learning transfer process. Self-directed learning takes centre stage for GYE. They must be determined, committed, patient, humble, willing to learn, and prepared to implement what they have learned. GYE indicated they learn through self-assessment, self-reflect, acknowledging their limitations, observing what is happening in their environment, envisioning the future, making decisions, implementing, and reviewing (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020).

*Support structures* like family play a significant role in the learning transfer process. GYE reported on how they learned from their families and provided them with the platform to practice what they have learned, like decision-making and critical thinking, which they later utilise in their businesses (Soetanto, 2017). GYE identified friends as part of their learning transfer process. They use them as sounding boards to run through their ideas, depend on them for encouragement when it is tough and utilise their feedback to enhance their performance.

*Peers and communities of practice* play a significant role in the learning transfer process. As part of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, peers provide platforms to share ideas and challenges and develop solutions that GYE take back for implementation in their business ventures (Hafeez, Alghatas, Foroudi, Nguyen, & Gupta, 2018).

*Mentors* are influential in the learning transfer process; they guide the GYE on how to lead and manage their business enterprise. They also serve as a source of monitoring and evaluation on how goals that have been set are met and how to attend to areas that require improvement, thus helping to improve GYE performance in the business enterprise (El Hallam & St-Jean, 2016).

*Universities or academic institutions* are participants in the learning transfer process. They provide information on product developments, industry research, and new focus areas (Alexander, Martin, Manolchev, & Miller, 2020). GYE utilise this collaboration to plan their next products and help improve their products. Entrepreneurship is about innovations; academic institutions provide a platform for learning transfer (Reichert, 2019).

*Customers* are active participants in the learning transfer process. Their feedback is the basis for GYE to acquire more knowledge to respond adequately to the customer's needs, thus leading to product enhancement, a performance measure for GYE. Customers become involved as co-developers in the product design of the product enhancement process (Najafi-Tavani, Mousavi, Zaefarian, & Naudé, 2020).

*Retailers'* feedback plays an important role in the learning transfer process. The input is utilised to help improve products, especially the packaging, so the products' image appeals to the target market (Ruiz-Martinez, Gil-Saura, & Frassetto, 2018). Lessons learned from interaction with retailers improve GYE's performance against competitors.

Team or business enterprise staff play a critical role in learning transfer. and implementing the ideas and lessons acquired by GYE. They are part of the value chain, and as expressed by one of the GYE, "One cannot work alone". Vicarious learning occurs within the enterprise (Argote & Fahrenkopf, 2016).

*Suppliers* provide valuable input to the learning transfer process; they have been in the supply industry longer and serve other clients. Suppliers utilise their expert information to guide GYE in approaching the product manufacturing process. GYE indicated they learned from this guidance, and it saved them a lot on production/manufacturing costs. Supplier relationships help to achieve quality, flexibility, delivery and timeous supply of product inputs (Al-Abdallah, Abdallah, & Hamdan, 2014).



*Government* plays an important role in learning transfer by creating a conducive environment by providing policies and regulations (De Gobbi, 2014). (Urquhart, 2016) Learning transfer happens within a context, and government policies and regulations provide the broader context, especially in a country like South Africa, where transformation is still key.

Relating was identified in this study as the core category that led to the proposed theory of relational learning transfer theory. Figure 1 below, The Relational Learning Transfer Model demonstrates that relating in the learning transfer process is linked to time. It emerged from data that relationship building is a phenomenon through which learning transfer occurs among GYE to resolve their main concern of staying afloat.

- Relating to the future: GYE can envision the future with a viable and sustainable enterprise; this sets the learning transfer in motion.
- Relating to the current and past: GYE assess their past experiences against the aspired future and identify the gaps to help them determine the knowledge they will require to fill the gaps. They also choose where, when and from whom they can acquire the knowledge. Attributes like humility are important as one can honestly acknowledge one's limitations.
- Relating to the current and past: GYE take stock of the environment to determine what is achievable. The operating environment is critical in checking who the competitors are, what other products are available, and what regulatory frameworks, enablers, and barriers exist. Learning transfer occurs within a context with historical factors, such as racial segregation playing a role in how relationships are governed in the country, such as the impact of BBBEE.
- Relating to the future and present: GYE relate to the future by strategising how they will address the gaps identified through self-assessment, acquire knowledge, and overcome the challenges presented by the environment to address the main concern of staying afloat. GYE interact with various role players including peers, customers, suppliers, and others to acquire learning and resolve their main concern of staying afloat. It is in and through these relationships that learning transfer occurs.
- Relating to the future and present: GYE relate to the future and present by making decisions about their next steps, having assessed the past experiences, the operating environment, and many options.
- Relating to the past, present and future: GYE relate to all time frames by establishing relationships with the self, the environment and strategic options.

In and through these relationships, their main concern of staying afloat gets addressed, and the process of learning transfer occurs. These relationships cut across time, people, structures and processes and thus results in relational learning transfer.

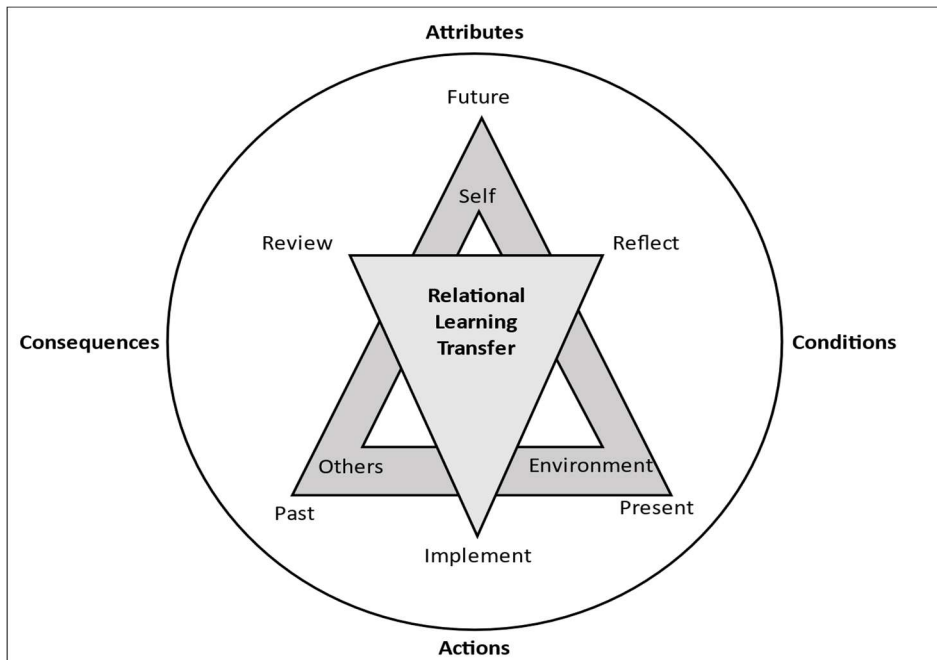


Figure 1: The Relational Learning Transfer Model developed from this study

Relationship building was identified as the vehicle through which GYE acquire and transfer learning. The relationship involved various role players, and they included:

- Relating to self
- Relating with others
- Relating to the environment, such as time
- Relating to customers and suppliers
- Relating to retailers and distributors
- This study found that GYE depend on relationships for learning transfer. Most of the GYE are first-generation manufacturers in their families and communities. They must identify various role players in the industry who can help them build and sustain their businesses, and they attain this through forging relationships. Their relationships must be intentional and have attributes like patience, determination, commitment and humility to achieve their goals. The study identified the learning transfer matrix in Figure 2 below.

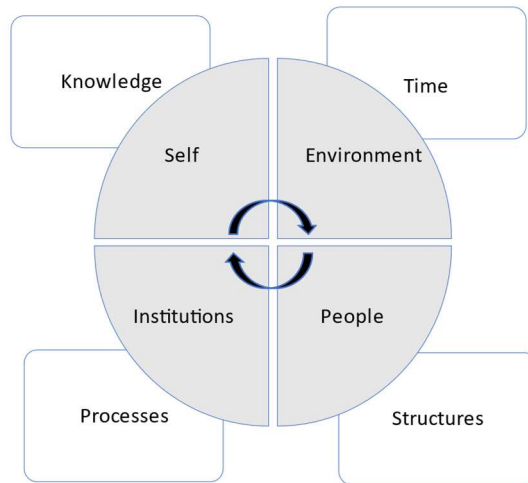


Figure 2: The Learning Transfer Matrix developed from this study

## 5. Conclusions

The study found that relational learning transfer theory accounts for learning transfer among Generation Y entrepreneurs in the SA manufacturing sector. Acquiring learning was identified as one of the pillars of the developed theory. Although most of the GYE indicated that they never knew about entrepreneurship as a core subject during their academic studies, they emphasised the importance of learning about the basics of specific industries/sub-sectors they operate.

The environment in which learning occurs plays a pivotal role in acquiring learning. South Africa's unique environment requires a dedicated effort to understand how the GYE entrepreneurs are sustaining themselves so that the knowledge gained can be replicated and enhanced to improve inclusion and increase the number of entrepreneurs in the country. This study found that entrepreneurial learning is acquired in and through relationships, both formally and informally, intentionally and incidentally, passively and actively and requires the involvement of the entrepreneur who is the learner.

The findings of this study are important for young and new entrant manufacturers as they will know what is required of them to participate in the South African manufacturing sector. Findings are also important for policymakers who will help create the environment to help young entrepreneurs to survive in the manufacturing sector. The academic sector also can incorporate the findings of this study as part of

their curriculum geared at developing entrepreneurs, as most of the entrepreneurs had indicated they had not received any formal training on entrepreneurship and were practising learn-as-you-go.

This study identified various ways GYE acquire learning in the manufacturing sector. Future research should focus on the cause and effect of each process through which GYE learn so that knowledge expands on this Acquisition of learning process.

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