INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol 16, Issue 11, (2026) E-ISSN: 2222-6990

Reflective, Experiential and Coaching-Based Workplace Learning in Service Organisations A Systematic Literature Review

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DOI Link: http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i11/29409

Published Date: 16 November 2026

Abstract

Service organisations depend on frontline employees whose competence is built largely at work, yet evidence on structured workplace learning remains fragmented. This systematic literature review synthesises empirical evidence on reflective, experiential and coaching-based learning among in-service workers and identifies the organisational conditions that shape it. Following PRISMA 2020, 97 open-access journal articles published between 2021 and 2026 were retrieved from Scopus and screened against set eligibility criteria. Twenty-nine studies were included, appraised with the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool and synthesised thematically. The evidence was dominated by healthcare and human services in high-income countries, qualitative designs and self-reported outcomes. Five themes emerged, (1) reflection works best when built into daily work; (2) real work experience builds skills when it matches the job; (3) coaching and feedback depend on prepared coaches and trust; (4) peers and groups spread new practice across teams; and (5) workplace conditions, such as supervisor support, psychological safety, hierarchy and workload, decide whether learning is used. The review proposes a structured workplace learning cycle linking these elements. Workplace learning becomes sustainable when it is built into daily work and supported by supervisors. Stronger behavioural evidence is needed from Southeast Asian and frontline service sectors such as private security.

Keywords: Workplace Learning, Reflective Practice, Experiential Learning, Coaching and Mentoring, Service Workforce, Sustainable Human Resource Development, Systematic Literature Review

Introduction

Service organisations compete on the quality of interactions between their employees and the people they serve (Heskett et al., 1994). Research on the service encounter shows that customers judge service quality largely through the behaviour of the frontline employees they meet, and that how these customer-contact employees are managed shapes service

outcomes (Bitner et al., 1990; Hartline & Ferrell, 1996). In labour-intensive sectors such as healthcare, social care, policing, retail and private security (Button, 2019), service quality is produced in real time by frontline staff and their immediate supervisors, often under pressure, in dispersed locations and across rotating shifts (Kim & Shin, 2025; Walker et al., 2026). The service–profit chain links the capability and satisfaction of these employees to service value, customer loyalty and organisational performance (Heskett et al., 1994). The competence of this workforce is therefore a strategic resource (Barney, 1991), and how it is developed is a central question for service management.

Much of this competence is acquired not in classrooms but at work. Workplace learning scholars have long argued that capability develops through participation in authentic tasks, through reflection on experience and through relationships with more experienced colleagues (Billett, 2001; Eraut, 2004; Tynjälä, 2008). Classical theories provide a shared vocabulary for these processes. Experiential learning theory describes a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984); reflective practice distinguishes reflection in action from reflection on action (Schön, 1983); and situated learning locates expertise in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Yet the training-transfer literature continues to report that much formal training fails to change behaviour at work, largely because of what happens after the training event (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Grossman & Salas, 2011).

In many service sectors, competence development is further shaped by national occupational standards and certification. Such standards define what workers should be able to do, but they do not, in themselves, specify how competence is learned and sustained in the workplace. There is a risk that certification becomes a box-ticking exercise unless it is embedded in deliberate learning processes. This concern is acute in frontline sectors with high turnover, flat career structures and limited training budgets, where development is frequently reduced to compliance training.

Sustainability adds a further dimension. Sustainable human resource management treats employees' capabilities, well-being and employability as resources that must be regenerated rather than consumed (Ehnert, 2009). The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals call for a substantial increase in the number of adults with relevant skills for decent work (United Nations, 2015). Workplace learning approaches that build lasting capability, rather than one-off compliance, are therefore relevant to both service performance and social sustainability.

Although each learning approach has its own literature, recent evidence has not been synthesised across sectors with a specific focus on in-service workers. Existing reviews tend to concentrate on pre-service education, single professions or single techniques. This review addresses that gap by systematically synthesising empirical studies published between 2021 and 2026 on reflective, experiential and coaching-based workplace learning. It is guided by three research questions:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of recent empirical studies on reflective, experiential and coaching-based learning among in-service workers?

RQ2: What learning mechanisms do these approaches employ, and what outcomes do they report?

RQ3: What organisational conditions enable or constrain such learning in service organisations?

The review contributes an integrated framework that links these mechanisms and conditions, and it draws out implications for managers of frontline service workforces.

LIterature Review

Workplace Learning in Service Organisations

Workplace learning encompasses formal training, structured on-the-job development and the informal learning that occurs through everyday work (Eraut, 2004). In service organisations, the boundary between working and learning is particularly porous. Frontline employees learn by handling customers, incidents and colleagues, and supervisors act simultaneously as managers, role models and informal trainers (Billett, 2001). Training-transfer research identifies three groups of factors that determine whether learning is applied at work which are trainee characteristics, training design and the work environment, with supervisor and peer support among the strongest predictors (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Grossman & Salas, 2011).

Reflection, Experience and Coaching as Learning Mechanisms

Three families of mechanisms recur in the literature. The first is reflection. Reflective practice enables practitioners to examine experience, question assumptions and adjust future action (Schön, 1983); at its most critical, reflection can transform the frames through which adults interpret their work (Mezirow, 1991). The second is structured experience. Experiential learning theory treats experience as the raw material of learning, provided it is followed by reflection and experimentation (Kolb, 1984), while deliberate practice emphasises repeated, focused rehearsal with feedback as the route to expert performance (Ericsson et al., 1993). The third is relational support through coaching, mentoring, preceptorship and feedback, which draws on social learning through observation and modelling (Bandura, 1977) and on the psychological safety needed for people to admit errors and ask for help (Edmondson, 1999). These mechanisms are complementary, yet they are usually studied in isolation.

Workplace Learning and Sustainability

From a sustainability perspective, the value of workplace learning lies in its durability. Sustainable human resource management emphasises the regeneration of human capabilities over time (Ehnert, 2009), and target 4.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals focuses on skills for decent work (United Nations, 2015). Learning approaches that build reflective capacity, confidence and autonomy, and that are embedded in organisational routines, are more likely to sustain service quality, safety and retention than episodic training. This review therefore examines not only learning mechanisms but also the organisational conditions that allow them to persist.

Methodology

Review Design

The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021). Because the included studies were methodologically heterogeneous, a thematic synthesis approach was adopted (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The review protocol was not registered.

Search Strategy

Scopus was selected as the primary database because of its broad coverage of peer-reviewed management, education and health research. The search combined three concept blocks applied to titles, abstracts and keywords, learning approaches (for example, "reflective practice", "structured reflection", "workplace coaching", "deliberate practice" and "experiential learning"), development outcomes (for example, competencies, "professional development", "employee development" and "training transfer"), and organisational population terms (employees, managers, workers and organisations). Results were limited to English-language journal articles in their final publication stage, published between 2021 and 2026, available as open access and indexed in the Social Sciences subject area; records were further limited to those indexed with the keyword "Human" or "Experiential Learning". The search was run in Scopus Advanced Search on 5 October 2026 and returned 97 records, which were exported with full bibliographic information and abstracts. Table I presents the Boolean search string.

Table I

Boolean Search String (Scopus)

Search block	Boolean string (searched in TITLE-ABS-KEY)
Block 1: Learning approach	"Reflective practice" OR "guided reflection" OR "structured reflection" OR "critical reflection" OR "managerial coaching" OR "workplace coaching" OR "coaching intervention" OR "deliberate practice" OR "experiential learning"
	AND
Block 2: Development outcome	competency* OR capability* OR "skill* development" OR "professional development" OR "employee development" OR "transfer of training" OR "training transfer"
	AND
Block 3: Organisational population	employee* OR manager* OR worker* OR organisation*
Limits applied	Publication year 2021–2026; document type: article; publication stage: final; language: English; subject area: Social Sciences; access: open access; indexed keyword: Human OR Experiential Learning
Date and result	Search run and exported on 5 October 2026; 97 records retrieved

Note. Terms within a block are combined with OR, and blocks are combined with AND. Quotation marks search an exact phrase. The asterisk (*) captures word endings (e.g., competence* finds competence, competency and competencies), and the question mark (?) captures spelling variants (organisation and organization).

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility was defined using the population, concept and context approach together with study-type criteria (Table II). The population was restricted to in-service workers in order to keep the review distinct from the large literature on pre-service education. Studies focused primarily on leadership-development models were outside the scope because they have been addressed in a separate review.

Table II
Eligibility Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	In-service workers, supervisors or managers, including employed post-qualification trainees	Pre-service students or trainees; unemployed or pre-employment learners
Concept	Reflective practice, experiential learning, coaching, mentoring, feedback, deliberate practice or peer and community learning	Competency frameworks, curricula or tools not examining how workers learn; leadership-development models
Context	Workplace learning or work-linked professional development	Academic degree programmes; researchers' self-study
Study type	Original empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods)	Reviews, protocols, conceptual papers, commentaries and descriptive reports without empirical data
Publication	Peer-reviewed journal articles, 2021–2026, English, open access, Social Sciences subject area	Conference papers, book chapters, grey literature

Study Selection

All 97 records were screened on title and abstract against the criteria in Table II. The 39 records that passed this stage were retrieved and assessed in full text. Preliminary screening against the predefined criteria was assisted by a generative AI tool, and the first author reviewed and verified every screening decision. To ensure transparency, every decision and its reason were recorded in a screening log (supplementary file), so that each inclusion and exclusion can be traced and audited.

Quality Appraisal

The methodological quality of the included studies was appraised using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018, which allows qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods studies to be assessed with design-specific criteria (Hong et al., 2018). Each study was rated on the five criteria relevant to its design; preliminary ratings were assisted by a generative AI tool and reviewed and finalised by the first author. In line with MMAT guidance, studies were not excluded on the basis of quality; ratings were used to weigh the evidence during synthesis.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

A standardised extraction form captured author, year, country, sector and participants, design and sample size, learning approach, and main findings. Thematic synthesis proceeded in three stages (Thomas & Harden, 2008) which are line-by-line coding of findings, organisation of codes into descriptive themes, and development of analytical themes that addressed the research questions. Reported outcomes were also mapped to the four levels of Kirkpatrick's evaluation model which are reaction, learning, behaviour and results (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

Results

Study Selection

Fig. 1 summarises the selection process. Of the 97 records screened, 58 were excluded at the title and abstract stage. 43 involved pre-service students or trainees, nine were reviews, conceptual papers or commentaries, and six were descriptive reports without empirical data. Of the 39 full-text reports assessed, ten were excluded because the participants were not in-service workers (n = 5), the study did not examine a workplace learning approach (n = 3), or the context was an academic programme or self-study (n = 2). Twenty-nine studies were included.

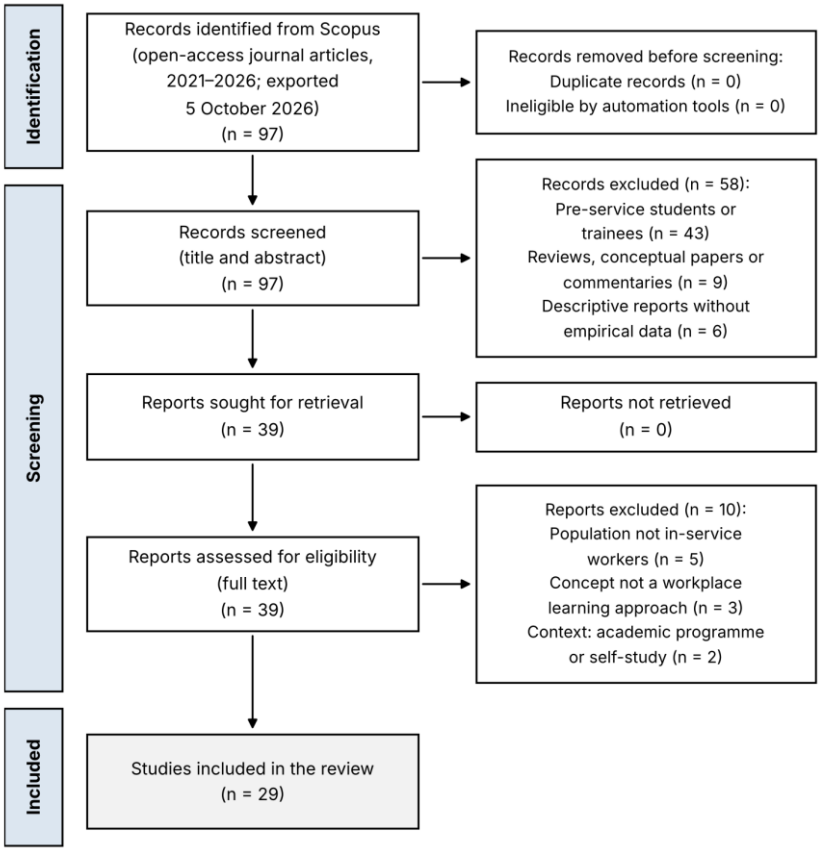


Fig. 1 PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study selection process

Characteristics of the Included Studies

Table III summarises the characteristics of the 29 included studies, and Table IV details each study. Publication activity increased sharply in the later years of the period: 19 of the 29 studies were published in 2025 or 2026. The evidence base was geographically concentrated. Australia and the United States contributed five studies each and the United Kingdom three, while four studies spanned several countries. Only four single-country studies were conducted in Asia (Pakistan, Qatar, South Korea and Thailand), and only one of these, in Thailand, was from Southeast Asia (Srisawat & Wannapiroon, 2022).

Healthcare dominated the evidence base, accounting for 18 studies, followed by social and community services (five studies). Only two studies addressed public safety and security work: police officers' communication training (Adamonienė et al., 2025) and safety training among maritime officers (Wahl & Hybertsen, 2025). Single studies came from local government,

retail, school education and a mixed sample of corporate and public-sector workers. Qualitative designs predominated (18 studies), followed by quantitative (six) and mixed-methods designs (five). Where reported, sample sizes were generally small, ranging from six participants (Alsiö et al., 2022) to 302 survey respondents (Al-Diery et al., 2025); 14 studies had fewer than 40 participants.

Table III
Summary Characteristics of the Included Studies (N = 29)

Characteristic	Category	N
Publication year	2021–2022	7
	2023–2024	3
	2025–2026	19
Region	Australia	5
	United States	5
	United Kingdom	3
	Multi-country	4
	Other single countries (Canada, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, Qatar, South Africa ×2, South Korea, Sweden, Tanzania, Thailand)	12
Sector	Healthcare and health professions education	18
	Social and community services	5
	Public safety and security (police, maritime)	2
	Local government, retail, school education, mixed workers	4
Design	Qualitative	18
	Quantitative	6
	Mixed methods	5
Way of learning (Themes 1–4)*	Reflection	17
	Real work experience (incl. simulation and scenarios)	17
	Coaching and feedback (incl. mentoring)	12
	Peers and groups	11

Note. *Studies could report more than one way of learning.

Table IV

Characteristics and Main Findings of the Included Studies

Study	Country	Sector and participants	Design (n)	Mech.	Key findings	MMAT
Adamonienė et al. (2025)	Lithuania, Czechia, Romania	Police officers	Mixed (109)	E	Training neglects emotional regulation and de-escalation; officers call for scenario-based learning	4/5
Al-Diery et al. (2025)	Australia	Pharmacist supervisors and interns	Qual survey (302)	R, C	Self-awareness, reflection and feedback-seeking drive entrustment; supervisors judge inconsistently	4/5
Alsiö et al. (2022)	Sweden	Hospital directors, ward managers, supervisors	Qual (6)	R, P	Leaders endorse reflective small groups but direct them at lower levels, not themselves	4/5
Anand et al. (2026)	Qatar	Medical faculty	Mixed (10)	R, E	Hands-on experimentation and reflective discussion raised confidence in adopting new tools	3/5
Biwer et al. (2026)	Netherlands	University teachers (medical faculty)	Mixed (83)	R, E, C, P	Continuous portfolio with formative feedback replaced box-ticking; peer learning valued	3/5
Buck et al. (2025)	USA, international	Interprofessional faculty	Quant pre–post (6–27 per cohort)	R	Milestone-based self-assessment showed gains aligned with programme emphasis	3/5
Champion (2026)	South Africa	Retail managers and supervisors	Quant pre–post (94)	E, C	On-the-job blended programme with coaching improved nine competencies (learner and line-manager ratings)	4/5
Dolansky et al. (2024)	USA	Interprofessional residents	Quant pre–post (74)	E, C	Experiential QI curriculum with coaches improved knowledge; all teams completed projects	3/5

Study	Country	Sector and participants	Design (n)	Mech.	Key findings	MMAT
Epp et al. (2026)	Canada	Simulation faculty	Qual (27)	R, C	Peer feedback valued within relational culture, growth mindset and psychological safety	5/5
Fish et al. (2022)	UK	Hospital educators, consultants, junior doctors	Qual (8)	C	Supportive leaders, feeling valued and safe space enable learning; time is the main barrier	3/5
Hall et al. (2026)	Australia	School social workers and wellbeing staff	Mixed (NR)	E, P	Facilitated mutual-aid group skills lab supported in-the-moment practice learning	3/5
Hindi et al. (2022)	UK	Employed trainee pharmacists and tutors	Qual (34)	E, C	Graduated supervision from shadowing to independent practice with feedback was key	5/5
Hodža-Beganović et al. (2021)	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro	Hospital physicians, nurses, managers	Qual design-based (29)	R, E, P	Individual reflection, small-group and wider discussion contextualised non-technical skills	3/5
Kim and Shin (2025)	South Korea	Preceptor nurses	Quant cross-sectional (216)	R, C	Critical reflection, workload reduction and shift alignment predicted teaching behaviour	4/5
Lau et al. (2025)	USA	Physician faculty coaches	Quant descriptive (119)	E, C	Longitudinal development produced independent teaching and 242 improvement projects	3/5
Liu et al. (2021)	USA	Adult protective services caseworkers	Qual (63)	E	Workload, basic content and unsupportive supervisors blocked transfer; safety training valued	5/5
Marchi and Paganotti (2025)	USA	Experienced paramedics in advanced training	Qual (11)	R, E	Post-simulation reflective debriefs fostered autonomy, competence and relatedness	4/5

Study	Country	Sector and participants	Design (n)	Mech.	Key findings	MMAT
Mashao et al. (2025)	South Africa	Emergency nurses and managers	Qual (12)	R, C	Transition programmes need support systems, orientation, competencies and reflective practice	4/5
Ngwasi et al. (2026)	Tanzania	Local government staff	Qual (38 interviews, 3 FGDs)	E, P	Role-play, discussion and peer modelling improved service and supervision skills	5/5
Oon et al. (2025)	Six countries	Residency programme directors on residents	Qual (138)	E, P	Community of practice, senior modelling and flatter hierarchy sustained learning in crisis	4/5
Quilliam et al. (2023)	Australia	Rural health managers and academics	Qual (20)	E	Experiential, flexible delivery enabled uptake; cost and poor tailoring hindered it	5/5
Rehman et al. (2026)	Pakistan	Medical faculty mentors and mentees	Qual (13)	R, C	Reflective dialogue and recognition drove mentoring; limited time and mentor preparation constrained it	5/5
Silverman and Sadowski (2025)	Australia	Child and family practitioners	Qual (8)	R, P	Organisation-wide training built shared language, reflective functioning and supportive supervision	3/5
Srisawat and Wannapiroon (2022)	Thailand	Primary school teachers	Quant pre–post (30)	E, P	Virtual learning community with experiential design thinking rated highly	2/5
Wahl and Hybertsen (2025)	Norway	Maritime deck officers	Qual ethnographic (NR)	R, E, P	Reverse training transfer; hierarchy shapes feedback; juniors-first debriefing counters rank	4/5
Walker et al. (2026)	Multi-country	Acute-care clinicians and elite tennis players	Qual (30)	R, E, C, P	Healthcare dyads lack rehearsal and informal feedback due to workload and shifting rosters	4/5

Study	Country	Sector and participants	Design (n)	Mech.	Key findings	MMAT
Watts (2023)	Australia	Social work practitioners, academics, students	Qual (NR)	R	Reflective practice central to practice wisdom, accountability and self-awareness	4/5
Williams et al. (2022)	UK	Social work supervisors and managers	Qual practice evaluation (NR)	R, P	Small reflective groups offered collective curiosity and containment	2/5
Zurloni et al. (2026)	Italy	Public and private sector workers	Mixed diary (18)	R	Emotional granularity preceded critical reflexivity in a reflective writing course	3/5

Note. Mech. = way of learning: R = reflection (Theme 1); E = real work experience (Theme 2); C = coaching and feedback (Theme 3); P = peers and groups (Theme 4). NR = not reported in the abstract. FGD = focus group discussion; QI = quality improvement. MMAT ratings were finalised by the author (see Declaration of Generative AI Use).

Methodological Quality

The MMAT ratings indicated moderate overall quality. The qualitative studies generally met most criteria, with clear research questions and appropriate data collection. Common weaknesses were small single-site samples, reliance on self-report and limited reflexivity about researchers' dual roles, since several programmes were evaluated by their own designers (Biwer et al., 2026; Silverman & Sadowski, 2025). Quantitative studies mostly used single-group pre–post designs without control groups (Buck et al., 2025; Srisawat & Wannapiroon, 2022), and only one study triangulated self-ratings with line-manager ratings (Champion, 2026). Mapped to Kirkpatrick's model, most outcomes were at the reaction and learning levels. Behaviour change corroborated by a third party or by work products was reported in only three studies (Champion, 2026; Dolansky et al., 2024; Lau et al., 2025), and evidence at the results level was rare.

Theme 1: Reflection Works Best When Built Into Daily Work

Reflection was the most frequently reported mechanism, appearing in 17 studies, but the studies consistently suggested that its value depended on how it was integrated into work. When reflection was left to the end of a programme, it became an artificial, box-ticking exercise. In the redesign of a university teaching qualification by Biwer et al. (2026), moving portfolio work from a final task to a continuous activity between sessions, supported by formative feedback, turned the portfolio into a genuine tool for growth. Similarly, the transition-programme components identified by Mashao et al. (2025) for novice emergency nurses included reflective practice as a core, ongoing element rather than an add-on.

Reflection was also shown to be a capability that develops over time and has prerequisites. In the diary study of Italian workers by Zurloni et al. (2026), the ability to recognise and name emotions precisely preceded the emergence of critical reflexivity. Watts (2023) found that social workers viewed reflective practice as central to practice wisdom and accountability,

while Alsiö et al. (2022) showed that hospital leaders endorsed reflective small groups for continuing professional development but tended to prescribe them for staff below them rather than for themselves. Two studies linked reflection to workplace trust and autonomy. Supervisors granted interns greater independence when they showed self-awareness and receptiveness to feedback (Al-Diery et al., 2025), and preceptor nurses' critical reflection competence predicted their clinical teaching behaviour (Kim & Shin, 2025).

Guided reflection immediately after practice was particularly productive. Post-simulation debriefs fostered autonomy, competence and relatedness among experienced paramedics (Marchi & Paganotti, 2025), and a structured cycle of individual reflection, small-group discussion and wider sharing helped Balkan hospital teams translate non-technical skills concepts into their own practice (Hodža-Beganović et al., 2021). Walker et al. (2026) distinguished reflection in action, such as quick "what's working?" exchanges during a task, from reflection on action, and noted that healthcare teams relied almost entirely on the latter.

Theme 2: Real Work Experience Builds Skills When It Matches the Job

Seventeen studies reported experiential mechanisms that connected learning to real or realistic work. Scenario-based practice and role-play were valued because they allowed rehearsal of difficult interactions in safe conditions. Police officers in three European countries reported that their communication training neglected emotional regulation, de-escalation and encounters with distressed members of the public, and they called for experiential, scenario-based methods aligned with field realities (Adamonienė et al., 2025). In Tanzanian local government, role-play, group discussion and peer observation in off-the-job training improved customer service, supervision and record management, although relevance varied across job grades (Ngwasi et al., 2026).

Programmes that tied learning to real work tasks reported the strongest behavioural outcomes. A blended management development programme in South African retail, built on on-the-job primacy and structured coaching, improved all nine targeted competencies as rated by both learners and line managers (Champion, 2026). Longitudinal, project-based programmes produced tangible work outputs, including completed quality-improvement projects (Dolansky et al., 2024) and 242 health-system improvement projects led by trained faculty coaches (Lau et al., 2025). Experiential workshops grounded in Kolb's cycle also supported faculty in adopting new practices, although evidence was limited to self-report (Anand et al., 2026; Srisawat & Wannapiroon, 2022).

Experience alone, however, was not sufficient. Caseworkers in adult protective services valued practical training, particularly on worker safety, but reported that overly basic content and poor alignment with local procedures limited its application (Liu et al., 2021). Research training for rural health professionals was taken up when it was experiential and flexible but hindered by cost and lack of tailoring (Quilliam et al., 2023). Across studies, experience produced learning when it was authentic, relevant to the local context and followed by reflection.

Theme 3: Coaching and Feedback Depend on Prepared Coaches and Trust

Twelve studies highlighted relationships through which more experienced colleagues guided learning. Structured mentoring at a Pakistani medical university operated through reflective dialogue, informal engagement and recognition, producing gains in confidence and collegiality, but it was constrained by lack of protected time, inadequate mentor preparation and poor matching (Rehman et al., 2026). Among trainee pharmacists, supervision that moved gradually from shadowing to independent practice with feedback was seen as the hallmark of a successful placement (Hindi et al., 2022).

The quality of feedback depended on the relationship in which it was given. Simulation educators who exchanged peer feedback on their debriefing valued it most when it was delivered within a relational culture characterised by trust, a growth mindset and a safe space for self-reflection (Epp et al., 2026). Entrustment research showed that supervisors varied considerably in their propensity to trust, and that both supervisors and interns wanted training to make these judgements more consistent (Al-Diery et al., 2025). Preceptors' teaching was also shaped by workload and by whether their shifts were aligned with those of the novice they supported (Kim & Shin, 2025). Together, these studies suggest that coaching relationships require deliberate preparation of the coach, protected time and structural alignment.

Theme 4: Peers and Groups Spread New Practice Across Teams

Eleven studies showed that learning was amplified when it was shared. Reflective groups for social work supervisors provided "collective curiosity and containment", a space in which supervisors could explore dilemmas with peers (Williams et al., 2022). A facilitated mutual-aid model of group skills training for school social workers emphasised in-the-moment group dynamics over prepackaged content (Hall et al., 2026). When an entire welfare organisation was trained in the same practice framework, staff developed a shared language, reflected more on their own practice, and supervisors began to see themselves as a secure base for their teams; a practitioner whose team had not been trained found it difficult to apply the learning alone (Silverman & Sadowski, 2025).

Communities of practice supported learning in disrupted conditions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, residents' capability and resilience grew through modelling by seniors and peers and through a temporary flattening of hierarchies (Oon et al., 2025). Wahl and Hybertsen (2025) went further, conceptualising "reverse training transfer" among maritime officers, learning flowed continuously in both directions between the workplace and simulator training, and was collectively constructed among reflective practitioners rather than carried individually from course to job.

Theme 5: Workplace Conditions Decide Whether Learning Is Used

The final theme concerns the workplace conditions under which the four ways of learning operated. Supervisor and leader support emerged as the most decisive enabler. Caseworkers stopped applying new learning when supervisors responded that "that's not how we do it", and they recommended training supervisors in the same content as their staff (Liu et al., 2021). In an NHS teaching hospital, a positive educational culture depended on educators and trainees feeling valued, the presence of supportive leaders and a safe space for learning (Fish et al., 2022).

Hierarchy was a recurring constraint. In maritime simulator training, junior officers rarely challenged seniors, and captains avoided exposing their weaknesses in front of subordinates; skilled instructors counteracted this by inviting juniors to speak first in debriefs (Wahl & Hybertsen, 2025). Healthcare dyads were similarly constrained by hierarchy, workload and shifting rosters, which limited the rehearsal, informal feedback and emotional trust that characterised expert teams in other domains (Walker et al., 2026). Workload, lack of protected time and misaligned shifts were reported as barriers in at least six studies (Fish et al., 2022; Kim & Shin, 2025; Liu et al., 2021; Quilliam et al., 2023; Rehman et al., 2026; Walker et al., 2026). Finally, learning was weakened when it was disconnected from local practice or treated as compliance, as in teaching qualifications pursued only for certification (Biwer et al., 2026).

DIscussion

An Integrated Structured Workplace Learning Cycle

This review shows that recent research on workplace learning among in-service workers converges on four interdependent ways of learning (learning through real work experience, reflection, coaching and feedback, and peers and groups) operating within workplace conditions that support or hinder them. Fig. 2 integrates these findings into a structured workplace learning cycle. The cycle extends Kolb's individual model (Kolb, 1984) in two ways. First, it places relationships and groups at the centre of reflection, consistent with situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and with evidence that peer and supervisor support drive transfer (Grossman & Salas, 2011). Second, it treats organisational conditions as part of the learning system rather than as background, echoing the call for training to be understood as a continuous episode rather than a single event (Wahl & Hybertsen, 2025).

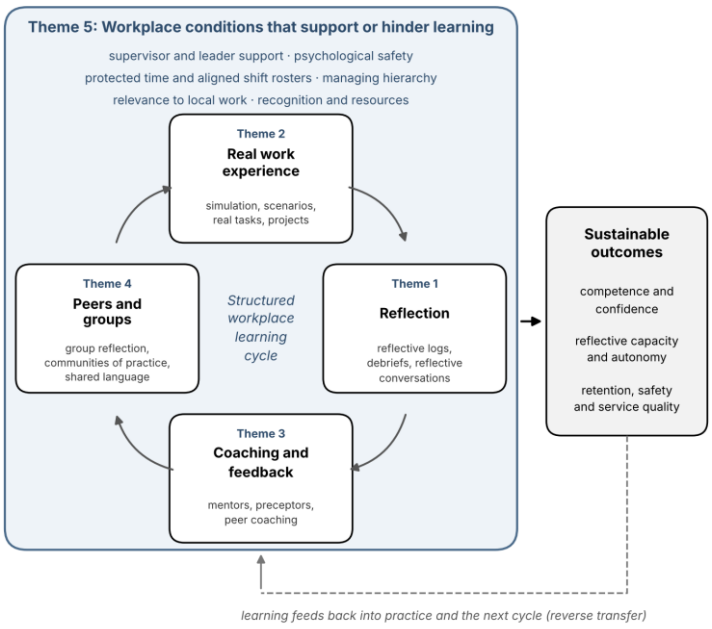


Fig. 2 Structured workplace learning cycle synthesised from the included studies

The findings also refine each way of learning. Reflection is most effective when it is continuous, guided and dialogic, and when it attends to emotions as well as cognition (Biwer et al., 2026; Zurloni et al., 2026). Experience must be authentic and locally relevant to avoid the gap between training and field reality reported by police officers and caseworkers

(Adamonienė et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2021). Coaching depends on the preparation of coaches and on structural alignment between coaches and learners (Kim & Shin, 2025; Rehman et al., 2026). Learning through peers and groups requires a critical mass of trained colleagues and a shared language (Silverman & Sadowski, 2025).

Implications for Service Management

For managers of frontline service workforces, three implications follow. First, supervisors are the pivot of workplace learning. They are simultaneously role models, coaches and gatekeepers of transfer, and their own development should therefore precede or accompany that of their teams (Fish et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2021). Second, hierarchy and power distance must be managed explicitly. In high power-distance cultures, where questioning a superior may be avoided (Hofstede et al., 2010), facilitation techniques such as independent facilitators, juniors-first debriefing and psychologically safe group norms are likely to be essential (Edmondson, 1999; Wahl & Hybertsen, 2025). Third, the design of work affects learning. Rostering that separates coaches from learners, unprotected time and heavy workloads undermine even well-designed programmes (Kim & Shin, 2025; Walker et al., 2026).

These implications are relevant to sectors under-represented in the evidence base. Private security, for example, combines dispersed sites, rotating shifts, hierarchical command structures, competency standards and safety-critical encounters, the very conditions that the included studies identified as both demanding and constraining for learning. The structured workplace learning cycle offers a starting point for designing supervisor development in such contexts, in which occupational standards provide the content and structured experience, reflection, coaching and peer learning provide the process.

Implications for Sustainability

The findings support a view of workplace learning as an investment in sustainable human capital. The outcomes most often reported, including confidence, reflective capacity, autonomy and a sense of being valued, are regenerative resources that sustain performance and well-being over time (Ehnert, 2009). Several studies linked learning to retention, safety and public trust (Adamonienė et al., 2025; Mashao et al., 2025; Wahl & Hybertsen, 2025). Embedding learning in daily routines, rather than relying on episodic courses, also makes development feasible in resource-constrained settings, as demonstrated in South African retail and Tanzanian local government (Champion, 2026; Ngwasi et al., 2026). Such approaches contribute to the Sustainable Development Goal of equipping adults with relevant skills for decent work (United Nations, 2015).

Research Agenda

The review identifies four priorities for future research. First, studies are needed in under-represented service sectors, particularly private security, hospitality and retail, and in Southeast Asian contexts, where only one included study was conducted. Second, designs should move beyond self-report towards behavioural and organisational outcomes, using third-party ratings, observation or service-quality indicators. Third, action research and design-based approaches, used by several included studies (Epp et al., 2026; Hodža-Beganović et al., 2021), are well suited to developing and refining interventions in partnership with

practitioners. Fourth, the role of hierarchy and national culture in shaping reflection and feedback deserves explicit investigation.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. The search was confined to a single database, to open-access articles in English and to the Social Sciences subject area, which may have excluded relevant studies, particularly from management journals indexed only under Business or from non-English-speaking regions. Screening and appraisal were conducted by a single reviewer, the first author, which may introduce selection bias, although predefined criteria and a fully documented screening log reduce this risk. The heterogeneity of designs and outcomes precluded meta-analysis, and the predominance of small qualitative studies limits the generalisability of the findings. The deliberate exclusion of leadership-development studies, while necessary to avoid overlap with a separate review, means that some relevant evidence on supervisory learning was not considered here.

Conclusion

This systematic review synthesised 29 empirical studies on reflective, experiential and coaching-based learning among in-service workers published between 2021 and 2026. The evidence indicates that workplace learning is most effective when real work experience is followed by reflection, supported by coaching and feedback and shared with peers and groups, all within workplace conditions that provide supervisor support, psychological safety, protected time and attention to hierarchy. The proposed structured workplace learning cycle integrates these elements and offers a practical basis for designing development programmes for frontline service workforces. Because current evidence is concentrated in healthcare in high-income countries and relies heavily on self-report, future research should test such approaches in under-represented service sectors and regions, particularly private security in Southeast Asia, using designs that capture changes in behaviour and service outcomes.

Declaration of Generative Ai Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Claude (Anthropic) to assist with summarising retrieved articles, preliminary screening of records against the predefined eligibility criteria, preliminary quality appraisal, drafting and language editing. The first author independently reviewed and verified all screening decisions, quality ratings, extracted data and references. Both authors reviewed and revised the text and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

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