

The extent to which informal learning is a neglected dimension of learning at work

Learning happens on a daily basis almost from birth, but the majority of what is learned over a lifetime is likely to be restricted to facts and abilities learned through school, college, or from in-company training courses. While some employers make formal learning opportunities available to their staff, most learning at work is of an informal nature, often related to the culture of the organisation and frequently not codified into a recognised body of knowledge (Eraut, 1994). Many organisations make no formal arrangements for learning to take place, to be recorded or even acknowledged, yet they rely heavily on the implicit, informal and occasional learning of their employees. Some employers may make formal arrangements through training and human resource development departments for training and development courses to be undertaken, yet may fail to take account of, recognise or acknowledge the vast amount of informal learning that occurs. Others, notably those committed to ISO 9000-2000, Investors in People, Health & Safety and environmental legislation tend to also show commitment to encouraging a mix of formal and informal learning as a way of developing their organisational culture.

This paper considers ways in which an employer or training provider might encourage and utilise informal learning as a means of increasing the manageable knowledge available to the organisation. While the area of study here falls mainly with large, public sector, bureaucratic organisations, it is suggested that lessons learned may well apply to other contexts.

For the purposes of this paper, learning at work is defined in its widest sense. Learning that takes place at work, formally or informally, clearly falls within such a definition, but can also include learning conducted outside work that is related to the workplace rather than for a social or home purpose. It can thus include a learning programme set up by the employer at an off-site venue, designed to meet the business needs of the workplace. However, learning at work need not be instigated by a manager, and can incorporate a group of workers simply discussing their work, seeking to improve their practices or processes, as well as formal on-the-job training programmes.

One of the challenges in finding an adequate definition of informal learning is that many definitions tend to rely upon first defining formal learning, and then stating that informal learning is something different.

Dale and Bell (1999) for example, offered a definition of informal learning at work as that which “takes place in the work context, relates to an individual’s performance of their job and/or their employability, and which is not formally organised into a programme or curriculum by the employer. It may be recognised by the different parties involved, and may or may not be specifically encouraged”. This definition works quite well for those workplaces where learning at work in any form is encouraged by employers and seen as having benefits for employers and employees alike. It does not seem to cover situations where the employer chooses not to offer learning opportunities to the workforce, even of an ad hoc nature, or where no formal qualification is available.

Informal learning can take place in any situation, although the main area of interest here is within the workplace. It has been suggested by the Campaign for Learning that up to 80% of all learning is informal. If that is true, or even partly true, then this raises important issues for employers and also for providers of learning activities, including Higher and Further Education, private trainers and consultants. Many of the staff development activities in the workplace are of a self-initiated, self-directed, and self-managed nature, with a few employers relying entirely on informal learning to maintain and improve quality and productivity. Providers may also be able to add value to the formal learning that they support and supply by deliberately incorporating opportunities for individuals to learn informally.

Billet (2001) suggests that “for many workers the workplace represents the only or most viable location to initially learn and/or develop further their vocational practice.” However, he also suggests that much learning at work is wrongly classified as informal (and therefore less interesting) learning. The traditional apprenticeship, which is a formal arrangement, incorporates aspects of informal or quasi-formal learning such as “sitting by Nellie”. It is clearly in the interests of providers of formal education to place a higher value on codified and classified knowledge.

Some workplaces however might utilise informal learning as an opportunity for creative solutions to problems. There is an issue here of contextualisation of learning, and the type of employer: bureaucratic, public or private sector, pro-active, creative, customer-focused, etc., may have a distinct effect upon the value placed on learning at work.

So, does the term informal learning simply exist to fill the vacuum left by that activity not covered by the definitions of formal learning as incorporating ownership and control of design, content, delivery and assessment of a codified body of knowledge? In an attempt to avoid this definition by what something is not, informal learning is defined here by the presence of a number of factors, which could include the locus of control, the way learning is assessed and the purpose of learning. Informal assessment is simply defined as checking learning, and may be considered here to include the fairly straightforward question of “Do I now know how to do this? If so, how well can I do this?” The individual will know why they want or need to learn something: it may be to deal better with a situation, or to increase their ability to perform a task, or to increase their confidence.

Informal learning is thus defined as learning which is located within the control of the learner. The more control for learning that resides with the learner then the more likely it is that the learning will be of an informal nature. That is not to say that informal learning cannot convert to formal learning, or that an individual worker has no personal authority to decide to take a formal course. Nevertheless, if the learner knows that they want to learn, decides how, when and where to learn it, and decides themselves whether they have then learnt it, that would fall within this definition of informal learning.

This can be usefully compared to Eraut’s 1994 study of work-based learning within engineering, which centred on how individual managers acquired knowledge about their work processes, and on a wider application particularly for learning by groups and organisations. In attempting to classify the different aspects of learning, he produced definitions of knowledge and typologies of learning in order to contextualise the way that individuals adopt different types of learning to meet specific needs. His definitions and typologies do not claim to fit together, and cover a wide range of different circumstance where learning may take place.

Eraut defined three types of knowledge: codified, cultural and personal. Codified knowledge is the public, formal information contained in books and journals, controlled by editors and peer review, examined for the award of qualifications, with its exclusivity protected by the professions of the Higher Education system.

Cultural knowledge is defined as a wider, group understanding created through social interaction and networking, which can include formal codified knowledge but will more often cover aspects of informal knowledge, implicit cultural norms that identify a group within a wider organisation. Personal knowledge incorporates the ability of individuals to use skills and knowledge gained from their own personal experiences and reflection to make meaning of their practical situation and which can incorporate ways of learning codified knowledge.

Eraut commented on the difficulty of studying informal learning at work, as he found that most people do not think about what they are learning, and are even less likely to be ready to discuss their learning with others. Employers are, he asserted, much more likely to consider formal codified learning opportunities, such as those arising out of an appraisal interview, as being worthy of support. This does not entirely resonate with the writer's own work or experience. Learning results in a change of behaviour, attitude, aptitude or skill. So if it is possible to detect a change then that could be evidence that learning has taken place whether formally or informally.

Can formal and informal learning happen at the same time? When a group of learners sit in a formal learning environment then they are expecting only formal learning, however they are surely going to observe informal interactions and ways of working that may enhance their own skills. Just because these are happening in a formal learning event do we have to call them part of formal learning? It will not be assessed and is not necessarily controlled by the teacher, although the teacher may be deliberately allowing this to happen to enhance the overall learning.

Studies of informal learning in a more general sense have covered a wider range of activities. In looking at the ways that community groups engage with learning, for example, the Cullen Report (2000) suggests the existence of four "key defining" dimensions of informal learning.

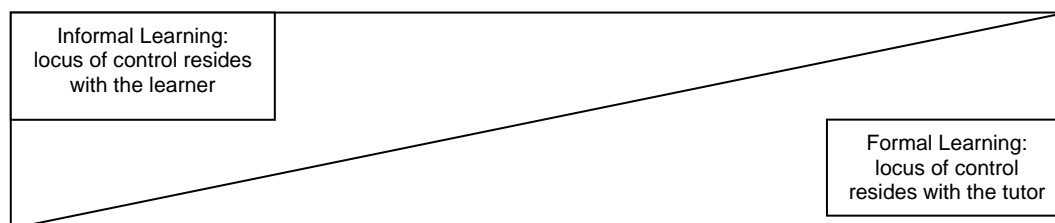
- (1) Domain – the environment in which learning is deemed necessary by the learner,
- (2) Context – e.g. whether self directed or community action or education outreach,
- (3) Arrangements for learning – pedagogic characteristics, and finally (4) the Process – how it originates and what it does.

That study, which concentrated upon informal learning in community based groups, specifically excluded work based learning and on-the-job learning on the basis that the gaining of qualifications would be more likely to raise self esteem than get a job, and that skills acquired during learning are generic rather than technical. However, the report states that work-based learning could enable individual citizens to engage in the “construction, interpretation and re-shaping of their own social identity and social reality”.

It is suggested here that the findings of Cullen et al resonate with those of Eraut (2000) and Coffield (2000) in that informal learning develops as a result of group or individual need, and that learning may in some circumstances be sustainable and transferable. People learn when they have a need to learn, whether formally or informally, sometimes learning incrementally, and others to create a more noticeable change in their environment.

A further question arises as to whether formal and informal learning are two separate dimensions or opposite ends of a continuum of learning. If formal learning is about organising and controlling the learning process; defining and clarifying the content, the method of transmission and assessment, then is informal learning simply the absence of these, or is it something positive in its own right?

Fig.1
Continuum module of learning



Work-based learning may reside at any point depending upon the type of organisation.

Basil Bernstein (1971) suggested a framework involving process, classification and framing. Process is about transmission and assessment of learning; Classification is about the nature of knowledge, the content and whether differentiated or integrated. Framing is the degree of control the educator has over the process. Learning may be directed in so far as the need for a piece of knowledge to be known, but the individual may then be able to choose whether to learn formally, from a manual or a training course, from trial and error, or by asking colleagues. The type of learning achieved may depend upon the learner's preferred style – e.g. a pragmatist (Honey & Mumford, Kolb) may be more prepared to learn reactively, whereas an activist may more naturally seek the entrepreneurial methods of Eraut's engineers (Eraut 1994).

If learning were about making meaning of something, then a period of trauma or upset would enable an individual, through a period of reflection and possibly self-help activity, to engage informally in making meaning of the event. This requires the exercise of imaginative will, rather than osmosis. In informal learning, the individual is the agent, not the teacher. It is non-assessed but may be judged by oneself or peers as to whether that learning has happened. It also may require re-iteration: further conversations and reflection will take the individual further through the learning process. While self-assessment is often encouraged within formal learning to create a self-managed learner, the informal learning is assessed informally. It may still be reiterated as part of the individual's desire to improve their knowledge or ability but may often be accompanied by a drive for continual improvement or self-improvement. This occurs in the workplace, for example, in learning how to cope with a difficult colleague, just as it is in social situations. The test for the learner is, "can they do it?" and then, "can they do it well?" Understanding the finer points of a sport can involve as much iterative self-assessment as learning how to improve one's teaching style or improving use of email facilities.

There is the additional possibility for much informal learning to contribute to formal learning, for example to supplement it, or to be formally assess or accredited at a later date, but for the moment of choice the power to choose lies with the individual learner.

So, when designing a Work-based Learning programme, what are the ways in which informal learning might support and complement formal learning activities? Dale and Bell (1999) suggest that the employer may design opportunities for informal learning at key

points during the working contract, for example by establishing induction sessions for new employees. Informal learning may also occur through enabling inexperienced workers to gain new skills through working closely with a more experienced worker (Vygotsky, 1978, Lave & Wenger 1991). Formal apprenticeships being less common in today's manufacturing sector, there is still a great deal of informal mentoring of younger employees. Team working creates an ideal opportunity for transfer of skills and knowledge.

Barnett (1999) suggests that informal learning can become useful knowledge to the organisation by a process of peer review: a simple discussion with colleagues to test out the validity of the new ideas, and then a sharing of that knowledge with others, can convert an individual's idea into a piece of knowledge that benefits all within the organisation.

Are there linkages between formal and informal learning? What are they? How do they work? In a recent study on the effects of a work-based learning Management Development programme for public sector employees, it was found that this programme is clearly an example of codified knowledge, and yet one of the apparent benefits of the programme was the opportunity to gain non-formal cultural and personal knowledge through the interaction of individuals who do not normally work together. To reinforce the opportunities for informal learning, the participants were encouraged to maintain a learning journal with at least 20 entries, one for each day of their programme. This developed their skills as reflective learners and also enabled them to track their progress over the course of a year. This made it easier to ask them questions regarding their learning, both formal and non-formal, and to gain more meaningful and considered responses. The results have shown that a great deal of informal learning takes place alongside formal learning.

So the final question is how to integrate that informal learning effectively into a formal programme, to the extent that it can be planned and even assessed. Certainly the use of action learning sets enables learning to happen both formally and informally. Time for general discussion, plenty of coffee breaks, and longer lunch breaks may assist in the creation of space for informal learning. This coupled with the use of learning journals, and perhaps further discussion may enable that learning to be converted into useful knowledge. But if the locus of control truly lies with the learner, then the big problem for the training provider is that assessment will become more negotiable and less certain.

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