

Chapter LIII

Three Theoretical Perspectives on Informal Learning at Work

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ABSTRACT

The workplace is a key arena for learning in today's society. The spiraling demand for knowledge in the workplace has increased interest in informal learning. In the field of adult education, informal learning has been recognized as one of the primary ways that adults learn throughout their lives. Although there are numerous informal learning approaches, the goal of this chapter is to explore three theoretical perspectives of informal learning in the workplace: individual, social and integrated. These perspectives raise issues as well as highlight the limitations and benefits of informal workplace learning. The chapter concludes with solutions and recommendations for dealing with the issues and implications for the practice of adult education.

INTRODUCTION

The workplace is a key arena for learning in today's society. Because of the rapid pace of change brought about by new forms of work, globalization, and technological advances, learning is pervasive in all types of organizations. Workplaces are influenced by the speed of change whether they are businesses, governmental agencies, health care organizations, not-for-profit groups, or edu-

cational institutions. The spiraling demand for knowledge in the workplace has increased interest in informal learning.

BACKGROUND

Although informal learning is defined in various ways, it generally refers to the acquisition of new knowledge understanding, skills, or attitudes,

which people undertake on their own initiative and which has not been planned or organized in formal settings such as schools, universities, or workplaces (Hrimech, 2005; Watkins & Marsick, 1992). In the field of adult education, informal learning has been recognized as one of the primary ways that adults learn throughout their lives. Almost 30 years ago, Tough (1979) demonstrated that the majority of adult learning projects occur outside of formal schooling or training. Recognition of the workplace as a key arena for this type of learning has been relatively recent. Marsick and Watkins (2001) define informal learning by contrasting it to formal learning. Formal learning dominates education and workplace training and refers to learning that is officially sanctioned and controlled by the organization. Training was the way that management communicated how work was to be performed (Marsick & Volpe, 1999). Because it is driven by the needs of the organization or credentialing body, formal learning relies on experts who decide in advance the content, objectives, instructional methods, and evaluation process. In contrast, informal learning does not receive official recognition and is driven by the choices, preferences, and intentions of the individuals who decide what they will learn and how they will go about learning it (Marsick & Volpe, 1999). Formal learning generally has a stated goal. Informal learning may or may not have a stated goal or be deliberately planned.

Although formal learning dominates workplace education and training programs, Marsick, Watkins, Callahan, and Volpe (2006) point out that more than 70% of learning occurs informally. Coffield (2000) uses the metaphor of an iceberg to describe learning. He says that if all learning were represented by an iceberg, the section above the surface of the water would convey formal learning but the submerged two thirds of the iceberg would convey informal learning. Employees do not recognize their own learning at work. Counterintuitively, most employers do not recognize informal learning at work even though it is critical

to an organization's effectiveness (Eraut, 2004). Although recent studies show that interest in informal learning is increasing in organizations (Cofer, 2000; Koike, 2002), there is very little consistency in the way informal learning is conceived, its methods of implementation, or description of outcomes. Informal learning itself is contested in some organizations as counter-productive, inefficient, and ineffective (Millar, 2005).

Although there are numerous informal learning approaches, the goal with this chapter is to explore three theoretical perspectives of informal learning in the workplace and the issues raised by these perspectives for practitioners. I describe each of the perspectives and the assumptions about learning on which they are based and raise questions and concerns about the workplace as a setting for informal learning, particularly the contested ground between organizational performance and individual development. As Coffield (2000) says, we need more curiosity about informal learning – particularly as it occurs in the workplace. In the following sections is the description of three informal learning perspectives: individual, social and combined.

THREE INFORMAL LEARNING PERSPECTIVES

An Individual Perspective

The first theoretical approach to informal learning, described by Marsick and Watkins (1990) envisions learning as a cognitive process whereby individuals make meaning of their work experience as they become increasingly conscious of their activities and interactions through reflection. Learning is informal in that it is not classroom-based or highly structured and control of the learning is primarily in the hands of the individual learner. This type of learning takes place whenever a person has the need, motivation, and opportunity for learning and generally occurs in

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