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# EFFECTIVE INFORMAL LEARNING: CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE WORKPLACE

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*This article consists of an academic librarian's suggestions for an individual wanting to be a successful informal learner in the workplace. Examples of modes of communication, scholarly activity, and education are explored, in addition to helpful mindsets and practical strategies for becoming an efficient and effective informal learner. Discussion is given concerning an individual's responsibilities and the environmental factors necessary for success in this type of learning. Prevailing climates and attitudes by administrators and employers are examined in addition to how these factors might influence learning of this type.*

From time to time, we may feel limited in our abilities, or get frustrated by doing tasks a certain way when we know there is a better way—if we only had the skills or “know-how.” It is unrealistic, in most cases, to expect people to have knowledge in certain areas that they rarely have had the opportunity to work in or to which they have had limited exposure.

During completion of my first degree, I found that I was gaining more expertise in my field while at the same time it was becoming a smaller area of specialization. I was learning more and more about less and less. As a librarian (an ever changing field), I am continually trying to keep abreast of the advancements, new technologies, and new sources of information, in addition to continually filling in the gaps in my own basic education in this “all encompassing” field. I find myself

knowing less and less about more and more, and sometimes you need to know a little more. There is not the time for much “formal” learning. In many cases, we must consider whether the time involved and needed scheduling changes are worth the effort, or if the classes being offered are specific or in-depth enough to our specific needs.

Informal learning, if the personnel resources are at hand, is the most time efficient way to go. It is imperative that informal learning take place for a person who is working in a growing, progressive environment (especially in an institution of higher education).

My purpose is not to discuss various definitions of different types of learning, but to offer practical advice for learning more effectively “on the job”—to learn informally.

Before defining informal learning, or self-directed non-formal learning, let's look at the types of communication used in the workplace.

## TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

Some understanding of the different types of communication should be recognized. Howard White, divides scholarly communication into four modes: formal—verbal and written, and informal—verbal and written. (White, 1994, p.42)

**Formal Written**—Examples of this mode of communication are books, or published material in journals or on the Web.

**Formal Verbal**—This mode includes formal classes, training sessions, or workshops that are pre-arranged, such as PowerPoint, Web Page design,

database searching, etc., or presentations at conferences.

Formal communication can be very helpful as an introduction, or exposure to a certain skill or topic—but one or two classes can't replace coursework, actually working in a specialized area, or hours of independent (non-work time) study.

Informal Written—Examples of this form of communication are E-mails or letters among colleagues.

Informal Verbal—Examples of this form are; telephone calls among associates in the same field, in-person discussions between co-workers, or persons who may hold answers to particular questions. Informal verbal communication is relatively free-form and private, direct and relaxed—a great environment for learning and growing.

### INFORMAL LEARNING

A study done by the Education Development Center, Inc., a Newton, Massachusetts research organization, showed that “70% of learning by employees, in the workplace, happens informally or outside formal programs.” (Day, 1998, p.30)

According to a Marsick and Watkins study, up to 83% of learning in the workplace happens informally or incidentally (Garrick, 1998, p.129). (They define incidental learning as that which is not planned or intentional, not consciously sought after.) (Cofer, 2000, p.1). A study done of librarians showed the 77% had reported being involved in at least one “self-directed” learning project which they had “planned and carried out on their own” in the past year. For academic librarians, the percentage was higher, at 82% (Varlejs, 1999, Pg.54).

In the workplace, one can learn informally by:

- Observing people
- Socializing
- Asking questions

·Personally reflecting (Day, (1998, p.5) on your encounters with others and on your own experiences

·Exploring work areas and disciplines outside of your own

Some benefits of informal learning are:

·It is need-specific and highly relevant to the individual (more so than formal learning which cannot be as need specific)

·It tends to be put into practice and used immediately (formal learning tends not to be put into use as quickly)

·It is spontaneous, more immediate, in the acquisition of needed knowledge (Formal is scheduled)

·Control of the learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner

·It is on going, continuous

On a personal level, just trying to solve technology related problems for a course that I teach, I have asked people “in the know” one question that has led to others and I have come away with new ideas and more material for my class, along with more knowledge and basic useful information. Informally, I have gained a lot, from peers, just by making a list of questions during the course of a week's time, and choosing

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what to ask the certain “person in the know” at an appropriate time for her or him. Bear in mind that nothing can be more annoying to a co-worker than to be regularly bombarded by casual questions. This will alienate some people who are valuable sources of knowledge. Also, the people that you may be using as resources are probably a resource for many others. Most people don't mind being consulted

because of their knowledge or expertise: don't abuse it. If possible, one-on-one mentoring over time is a great way to learn.

### MAKING IT WORK

To be an efficient effective informal learner, here are some hints:

1. Have a willingness to learn something that may be valuable to you from anyone.

2. Define how the best, time efficient way is to go about procuring the knowledge desired. It may be by attending a conference, class, your own private study, etc. (Formal), or by asking a few questions or as a written inquiry or “in person” (Informal)

3. Identify who the people “in-the-know” are for your specific areas of development:

-Are they approachable?

-Are they good communicators?

4. Learn enough about the topic through various means (perhaps a formal class or workshop may be the first step) to familiarize yourself with the basics, terminology, etc., so you will be able to ask intelligent questions in terms that are acceptable to the mentors (in their language)

5. Be open to learn what you may not expect to learn. Try not to have pre-conceived ideas as to the outcome of your inquiries. There may be something learned that was not intended on your part.

6. Try to insure that your question is understood fully. Sometimes one may not know enough about a topic to ask the appropriate question. Other times you may have pre-conceived ideas as to the answer to a question. Give the other person enough leeway in your queries so as to give him or her the ability to give well-formed, complete answers. Not all people are familiar with the “reference interview” which many librarians

experience. Librarians are adept at finding out what the other person is “really” trying to ask. Some questions may be more appropriately presented in the form of “another” question.

7. Communicate that the motivations for your questions are purely informational in nature, and that there is no hidden agenda. This puts the other person at ease and they won’t hesitate in giving complete in-depth answers.

8. Take charge of your own development, whether or not your present employment situation is supportive or conducive to learning.

9. Try new things, experiment if possible, and analyze the results.

### THE ENVIRONMENT

Informal learning may be the most beneficial, specific, and efficient way to learn, and it should be encouraged among co-workers and colleagues, and by superiors. An environment should be created and supported which is conducive to this mode of learning.

There is a different sense of fulfillment about learning informally. Employees are learning for “themselves”, not to satisfy any requirements or directives from their superiors (Dobbs, 2000, p.58). They are not doing it because they have to, but because they want to.

Should we help along the process of informal learning that is taking place, or leave it alone? I suggest just providing an environment where it can flourish.

In the Varlejs study, other influences on work-related learning not addressed, included; “organizational culture, professional roles and nature of job responsibilities, performance requirements, and career stage”. (Varlejs, 1999, Pg. 62)

If the demands of a job are too great, people are too busy, or schedules are so sporadic that time isn’t allowed for personal interaction, especially between persons of different areas of expertise, in the long-run there isn’t much hope for any informal learning or much of any other type of learning to take place on the job.

Informal learning will more likely occur between people whose offices or work areas are in close proximity to each other. In the working environment, people are less likely to interact in general, let alone share ideas and learn, if they are separated by great distances (Lohman, p.91). This factor is probably one of the greatest inhibitors to this type of learning.

Time and scheduling factors are also of great importance. Often employers feel that they can’t afford for employees to take off a whole day to attend a workshop when there are staffing limitations because of limited personnel or budgets.

A solution to this problem is the idea of sending one employee to a workshop and having them return and informally share with the other employees what was learned. Informal learning is immediate, spontaneous, and task specific (Day, 1998, p.35). It is very time efficient and of little cost.

A relaxed, trusting atmosphere, trust of employees on the part of supervisors or department heads, where there is a value placed on learning informally, is

*Take charge of your own development, whether or not your present employment situation is supportive or conducive to learning.*

key to a fertile environment. For example, the idea of co-workers “visiting” or “talking” to each other while on their shift should not be looked down upon or discouraged, in the interest of productivity, by what is perceived as “socializing”. These behaviors are “necessary interactions” encouraging the exchange of information, ideas, and learning, for the purposes of the enhancement of personnel quality and institutional growth.

This concept is a hard one for supervisors, for obvious reasons. Just because this type of positive informal

interaction cannot be quantified in the same way as a more formal learning situation could be, having: “X” number of workshops, focusing on “X” number of topics and “X” number of skills producing “X” number of results. Just because informal learning cannot be easily quantified doesn’t mean that this type of learning doesn’t exist or doesn’t have value.

Informal gatherings, conversations, and things of this nature may have been acceptable in the interest of good management for decades for reasons of recreation, morale, building a sense of community, and the “team” feeling, but not for “serious” education or training.

The notion prevails that if a gathering, or other social mode of communication, is loosely structured, relaxed, or “not quantifiable”, or “doesn’t look good on paper”, then it can’t be of much value. “Informal” gatherings can be planned by superiors for the sole purposes of exposure and education.

The increased practice of determining our “worth” as employees, our duties, capabilities, and productivity, in “units of measurement” and other attempts at quantifying aspects of our life is very apparent in the workplace. Some things can’t be well quantified, as in determining the value of informal learning.

### MOTIVATION

Other inhibitors of informal learning are oppressive working environments and insensitive mindsets. Although we may work with machines in technological environments, it doesn’t mean that we as individuals operate or behave like machines.

We see scheduling practices that don’t take into consideration: “down time” for “processing”, providing breaks for reasons of fatigue and refreshment, the effects of repetitive

tasks on people, ergonomics, mental and physical stamina, encouragement, support, respect, a sense of security, or anything else that would prove to be positive motivation to have more efficient, productive employees.

These types of environments encourage burnout, dissent, lessening quality of productivity overall, and the lack of a sense of well-being. People become less motivated and do not have the energy to pursue opportunities for informal learning under these circumstances.

Getting the “most” out of your employees doesn’t mean burning them out, using them up, and treating them as though they were dispensable. An environment in which people who are: respected, hold important positions, or of any high-profile role, are able to openly ask questions and can be seen by others as “informal learners”, is the greatest model to encouraging others in the organization to be secure in pursuing the same type behavior towards their own growth. This also gives the process of acquiring information much credibility.

### INSECURITY

“A culture that encourages employees not only to learn from their own mistakes, but to talk about them openly is also helpful”(Day, 1998, p.34).

If a person has a fear of asking questions on certain topics or bodies of knowledge, especially to peers or superiors, especially in areas of knowledge where they are expected to already have a certain expertise, few questions will be asked, frustration will increase, and no informal (immediate) learning will take place. An environment that dispels castigations of any type, even if implied, when it comes to learning, is the proper environment. No one should be looked down upon for his or her ignorance, especially when they take it upon themselves to try to correct that state. People should feel free to express their curiosity, interests, and goals.

We should share in successes and

failures. In competitive environments, upon the completion of projects, especially joint ventures, often we share in the praise if they are successful, but if they are not successful, someone (one person) is often deemed “responsible”. In this type of atmosphere, creativity in solution finding or active pursuits in informal learning is inhibited.

### THE BIG PICTURE

To help employees become better informal learners, and to guard against learning that may be too narrow or incomplete, an environment should be maintained that allows not only the ability to access knowledge, but to access the “big picture”—to see where an individual’s role may “fit in” to the overall goals of the institution. This gives people a perspective on their own work, and a chance to take an interest and develop appreciation and respect for the work of others.

### CONCLUSION

Although it is the most prevalent type of learning, in libraries, about four times the amount of time spent in formal learning (Varlejs, 1999, Pg. 60), some disadvantages to learning informally exist. This learning cannot be quantified easily, so it is difficult to gauge its effect, and difficult to use as a means for formal qualifications, and some people are more predisposed to this type of learning than others, so its value can vary from individual to individual. Conversely, learning informally is direct, immediate, need-specific, takes very little time, is inexpensive, and what is gained is usually applied sooner than formal learning. The study by the Education Development Center supports the idea that “formal and informal learning exist along a continuum rather than being two dichotomous learning processes” (Varlejs, 1999, Pg. 63)

Learning informally gives people a high degree of satisfaction, and is also a great complement to formal learning. When dialog ensues and ideas are exchanged, everyone can be a learner

and a teacher. The strategies suggested in this article are made to help a person along in the process of becoming a better informal learner, and in turn a more knowledgeable, valuable employee. The importance the environmental considerations in promoting, encouraging and maintaining these types of learning behaviors cannot be emphasized enough. If an environment is not maintained that encourages learning in this way, no growth will take place on an individual or corporate level.

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