

GETTING ACCESS TO COLLEAGUES IN LEARNING – THE NOTION OF INFORMAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines newcomers' transformation from educational knowledge to professional knowing, with focus on informal learning and established colleagues as knowledge sources. Informal learning becomes a question of getting access to colleagues, and is believed to be superior to formal learning. Established colleagues represent a vital knowledge source.

KEYWORDS

Lifelong learning – Workplace learning –
Informal learning - Newcomers

INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning is the new educational as well as organizational reality. It is an answer to our dynamic economy, where knowledge is viewed as a key strategic and competitive resource (Ipe, 2003). However, lifelong learning was an emergent theme and officially launched at the UNESCO Conference in Montreal in 1960. After a relatively quiet period, it became an important topic again, at a European level the concept was further developed in a Memorandum. The Memorandum on lifelong learning (Commission of European Communities, 2000) offers a structured framework, putting lifelong learning into practice at a national and international level using six key themes: new basic skills for all, more investment in human resources, innovation in teaching and learning, valuing learning, rethinking guidance and counselling, and bringing learning "closer to home". However, these key themes are not easily translated into everyday practice (Lans, Wesselink, Biermans & Mulder, 2004), neither is the European Commission White Paper from 1996 stating the importance of lifelong learning in accordance to "Teaching and Learning; Towards the Learning Society. The challenge is worldwide to identify what makes lifelong learning a reality in everyday life and to question whether current formal education and formal training activities provide a sufficient basis for lifelong learning. In other words: we need to focus on adult learning stretching across the lifespan.

Adult learning is an interdisciplinary field where the point of departure is an expanded learning concept, which includes learning through education, work and society. A changing society requires continuous challenges to learning, and the factors preventing or promoting quality in adult learning. While the concept of lifelong learning includes all learning arenas, the concept

of workplace learning focuses on the workplace, including both educational knowledge and workplace knowledge. The purpose of this paper is therefore to use the concept of workplace learning, when focusing on newly educated and their learning processes at work. In their transformation from educational knowledge to professional knowledge, the main focus of attention is on the importance of informal learning as a question of getting access to colleagues as sources of knowledge. Thus, my approach to workplace learning is in accordance to a social and cultural approach to learning, where learning is situated in social contexts and where culture and social relations with colleagues is integrated in the practice in which newcomers develop knowledge on how to perform and solve work tasks.

Learning arenas at work

Workplace learning often links to formal education, and the difference between school and work as the learning environment (Boud, 1999; Fisher, 2000). Thus, the novelty in workplace learning has its origin within the transfer from school to workplace as an emergent paradigm. Recent interest is taken in the coupling between learning and knowledge development connected directly to life, where meaning is attached to informal and everyday learning. Thus, focus is on the workplace itself as the learning environment, where learning is part of everyday practice at work. A number of researchers claim learning to be integrated and facilitated within the context of the workplace, and through social interaction between employees (Rogoff & Lave, 1999). The requirement is therefore for a flexible form of learning which enables employees to engage in a regular process of up-dating and continuing professional development, which increasingly emphasizes and facilitates forms of learning and types of knowledge in which learners are engaged (Reeve & Gallacher, 1999). Studies of workplace learning show informal learning to be the most common way of learning for employees (Collin, 2002), and Garrick (1998) and Boud (1999) suggest that informal social

interactions with colleagues are the predominant way of learning. Thus, informal learning should be legitimised as an important part of learning in becoming professionally competent (Solomon, Boud, Leontios & Staron, 2001; Van Woerkom, Nijhof & Nieuwenhuis, 2002)). It is even questioned whether formal education is necessary for working in practice, as how to use knowledge as a question of knowing cannot be learned outside the context of practice (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). Knowing and competence is not something individuals or organizations have, but must be regarded as something they do (Mulcahy, 2000). Therefore, Garrick (1998) and Boud (1999) claim the impact of formal training on practice (not in practice) to be quite marginal. Workplace learning arises and centres upon what Beckett and Hager (2002) refer to as two different paradigms of learning (acquisition and participation), which encompasses different epistemological assumptions and beliefs about knowledge and knowing. Hager (2004) notes that the acquisition paradigm of learning focuses on individuals as learners, and mainly on the rational cognitive aspects of work performance. Work performance tends to be conceived as thinking or reflection, and the importance of social, organizational and cultural factors in workplace learning and performance is often downplayed. Beckett and Hager (2002) term this paradigm the “standard paradigm of learning” because of its superiority. Workplace learning theorists who are concerned with informal learning processes are, conversely, contributing towards what Hager (2004) terms an emerging paradigm of learning (learning as participation). The paradigm tends to conceptualize knowledge differently, seeing knowledge as fluid; produced and continually reconstructed through relationships and interactions between individuals in social practices, as a question of knowing.

From a participation perspective, the appropriate unit of analysis is the social relations between people rather than isolated individuals. Focus on learning as social participation can be related to social theories on workplace learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Within this social and cultural approach to learning, the participation paradigm, for instance newcomers do not learn through facilitated and controlled teaching, but as a result of participation and being integrated in communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Lave and Wenger (1991) reject traditional didactic views of teaching and learning, and argue that learning is intrinsic to human activity. Hence, learning is situated and occurs through processes of participation in

social practices. It is within the participation paradigm this paper focuses on newcomers learning as a question of getting access to colleagues and discusses whether a focus on informal learning contributes to new understanding of newcomers learning processes.

The notion of informal learning

Informal learning concerns how people learn from dealing with daily experiences and dilemmas at work. Garrick (1998) explains that *“there are indeed rich sources of learning in day-to-day practice situations and that what is learned from experience is dynamic and open to multiple configurations”* (p.1). Informal learning focuses on learning occurring outside formal educational settings. Informal learning can therefore be both intentional as it can be incidental, and it can be practical and judgemental. All of these characteristics of informal learning can occur through social relations with colleagues at work (Eraut, 2000). These four principles of informal learning are considered central features of work as a practice, the workplace as the working environment, crucial to individuals’ knowledge development. Social participation at work tends to be considered not only crucial to understanding and facilitating learning, but as a more significant, effective and thus superior form of learning (Colley, Hodgkinson & Malcolm, 2002). Informal learning highlights the importance of everyday practice at work where learning is integrated in ongoing continuing processes of learning and knowing (Filstad & Blaaka, 2007). Several studies show that employees recognize learning from everyday practice at work as vital. When studying workplace learning in Nordic countries, Professor Henrik Holt Larsen states that learning at work, as informal learning, is more effective. Further, an extensive number of studies show that individuals are able to apply knowledge that is learned in the work context it is to be used (Larsen & Skovbo, 2002; Nilsen & Kvale, 2003). Drawing on a review of several studies of informal learning, Marsick and Watkins (2001) characterize informal learning as follows:

- It is integrated with daily routines
- It is triggered by an internal or external jolt
- It is not highly conscious
- It is haphazard and influenced by chance
- It is an inductive process of reflection and action
- It is linked to the learning of others

Garrick (1998) argues that Marsick and Watkins (2001) perspective on informal learning can be recognized and thus credited in formal courses, made effective and deliberately encouraged.

However, informal learning is a complex phenomenon, and most research focus around three main perspectives; informal learning as a valid form of knowledge acquisition; how people learn from experience; and how learning from experience can be facilitated and assessed.

Method

The past year, several in-depth interviews with newcomers in different organizations has been conducted. The sample consisted of newly graduated Master of Science students, with a total of 30 interviews. The findings resulted in a number of propositions leading to a survey consisting of 54 items. 39 items were statements respondents rated on a 5-point likert scale. The remaining 15 items were various control variables I considered to be significant. In this article I present and discuss the findings related to the following propositions: 1. Newcomers rely more on informal learning than formalized learning, 2. Newcomers are proactive in building informal relations and attaining informal groups at work and 3. Newcomers have access to established colleagues in learning.

The survey was distributed via e-mail to students graduating from bachelor and master studies in Norway in 2005 and 2006. It was sent to 1960 respondents, 952 at bachelor level and 1008 at master level. As our e-mail list consisted of previous school addresses, not all respondents received the survey. Unfortunately, it was impossible to calculate how many. Some reported not having a job yet, which ruled them out of our sample criteria. We received 244 responses from the bachelor students, and 295 responses from the master students, all together 539 responses (33,4% response rate). There were 54,5 % male and 45,5 % female who responded. 90% of the respondents were between 22 and 30 years old.

The respondents were mainly employed in positions at consultant level in different organizations. We conducted an exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation, and found support for 6 factors, using 22 of the 39 items. However, as this was a pilot survey, further development of the different factors are necessary in the future. The factors were: formal learning, informal learning, informal source, available knowledge, expectations and identification. The usefulness of our control variables were heavily influenced by the homogeneity in our sample. However, years employed in company, employed in position, and hours per week had a significant effect on some of the variables. We then correlated the factors, and found several significant relationships.

Further studies with a more diverse sample are necessary in order to establish the effect.

RESULTS/DISCUSSIONS

Proposition 1: Newcomers rely more on informal learning than formal learning

The respondents seem to recognize that their previous knowledge is limited, and that it is necessary to increase it in order to perform well and succeed. As a consequence, 92% find that they need to learn from colleagues, mostly as positive examples but also as negative examples on not to perform. When differentiating between the levels of knowledge established colleagues represent, 92% claim to obtain knowledge from colleagues in higher positions, 80% from colleagues at an equal level and 60% claim to learn from colleagues on a lower level. This is in line with their claim of using several colleagues in learning their new job, as they see that different colleagues represent different levels of knowledge. All respondents report that they find informal contact with colleagues important for their learning, and that they form informal bonds with colleagues at all levels in the organization. These informal learning arenas provide them with an opportunity to discuss work, observe and practice together with colleagues. However, they also find formal learning arenas to have equal importance to their learning. It seems to be in the combination of informal and formal learning arenas they develop own knowledge. The significance between the factors informal learning and formal learning (.28, $p < .01$) supports that a combination of the two is fruitful for newcomers.

Thus, it seems like the respondents rely on both formal and informal learning in learning their new job, and that they do not consider one to be superior of the other. However, the formal training most newcomers are presented with is related to the use of technical tools, actual work tasks and information about the company. They also consider going out on assignment with established colleagues as a part of their formal learning. Getting access to colleagues in learning is highly valued. They are in an early stage of their professional carrier, and are not that conscious of informal learning arenas they take part in. Hence, they do not recognize social relation and practicing with colleagues as learning in the same way as formal courses and training.

Their informal learning is a result of everyday practice, linked to the learning of others, and not necessarily conscious and mostly integrated in daily routines (Eraut, 2000; Garrick, 1998; Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Therefore, I find that

the respondents are unaware of how important informal learning is in their learning. And accordingly, most organizations do not focus on learning in everyday practice when formalizing training for newcomers (Jakobsen, 2003). Thus, it is the responsibility of the newcomers to learning from several colleagues and using them as positive examples on how to perform. For some newcomers, it is easier to get access because of a culture within the organizations that provides them with more opportunities and where learning from colleagues and sharing knowledge is more common and appreciated. Open landscapes are also highly appreciated among newcomers because colleagues because it is easier to access colleagues but also they are able to observe them in action. Working in projects and teams are another appreciated way of learning from colleagues at work reported by newcomers. However, mostly the lack of facilitating informal learning, and recognizing how crucial it is for learning is recognized (Colley et al., 2002), as it is not focused upon as important learning arenas, but more as a “bonus” of already ongoing work processes. To differ between informal and formal learning at work can provide some confusion as well. Organizations do arrange courses, but in these empirical studies they only seem to include a short introductory course and training directly related to work tasks. This is far from an educational setting and tends to be more into everyday practice at work. Hence, a clear distinction between formal and informal learning can provide some confusion when newcomers report the characteristic of their learning processes.

Proposition 2: Newcomers are proactive in building informal relations and attaining informal groups in the organization

I found support for a significant, positive relationship between identification and informal source (.15, $p < .01$), which could indicate that the larger degree of identification with colleagues could provide an urge to access these informal sources. The respondents recognize identifying with colleagues they want to get access to. They also tend to identify more with colleagues in a higher position than with colleagues in lower positions. The respondents report that they find it to be their responsibility to be proactive towards colleagues, and thus being responsible for own learning. Thus, I find support for proposition 2, as it seems like the newcomers are proactive in building informal relations and attaining informal groups at work. Informal learning is not recognized as superior at work, and as Wenger (1998) would claim, informal learning is not possible to fully facilitate. Informal social

relations and informal social groups are socially constructed among colleagues without obtaining necessary focus on its crucial importance on what kind of knowledge that is being shared and developed and to what extent it is in accordance to what the organizations goals and strategies are. The newcomers claim to build relations with colleagues in which they identify, mostly at a higher or same position. This is confirmed through a social participation approach to learning who claims that newcomers do not learn through facilitated and controlled teaching, but as a result of being integrated in informal social practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). Most organizations are poor in facilitation newcomers learning processes, which makes it up to the newcomer to take charge of own learning (Filstad & Blaaka, 2007). But even though informal learning is not facilitated, several examples and reports from newcomers show that established colleagues take charge themselves and have already a number of informal learning arenas themselves that they appreciated and find useful, so when newcomers are included in these informal relations and groups they are also able to get access to several colleagues in learning.

Proposition 3: Newcomers have access to established colleagues in learning

The significance between informal learning and available knowledge (.38, $p < .01$) indicates the importance of availability to informal learning. 82% of the respondents believe their colleagues to represent the most important knowledge, and as newcomers learn through observing and practicing with colleagues, it is vital that they are available to them. About 90% of the respondents find that preferred colleagues are available when they have a job related problem, but at the same time 64% report that a lack of access to colleagues does not represent a problem to their performance. This can be related to their statement that they are quite independent in performing own tasks and solving own problems. Thus, I find support for Proposition 3. It seems like the newcomers are proactive in relations to colleagues when necessary and that they are quite independent in their work. Newcomers find that established colleagues were very forthcoming and available in theory, but in practice their availability was quite limited due to a busy everyday schedule. As a consequence, newcomers had to rely on own knowledge and finding own solutions, and work independently. That is also in accordance with what is expected of them and what they expect of themselves. This can also be understood in relation to a commonly understanding of learning as individual acquisition of explicit knowledge (Beckett &

Hager, 2002). Outside formal learning arenas many newcomers do not expect to learn and obtain knowledge other than as a positive side-effect of working together. Learning as participation in a work context need to be highlighted as superior, and informal learning must be legitimized as the most important part of becoming professional knowledgeable (Solomon et al., 2001; Van Woerkom et al., 2002). It is in the recognition and consciousness of what informal learning is that we will find the potential of improving the facilitation of newcomers learning process.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines newly educated newcomers entering professional work. It focuses on the necessity of transforming educational knowledge to professional life and obtaining necessary knowing on how to perform and solve work tasks. The focus of attention is on participation and informal learning as a question of getting access to colleagues as important knowledge sources. The result of explorative qualitative study lead to the testing of the following propositions: (1) Newcomers rely more on informal learning than formal learning, (2) Newcomers are proactive in building informal relations and attaining informal groups and (3) Newcomers have access to established colleagues in learning. Newcomers report that formal and informal learning is equally important. Mostly, formalized training is quite limited and appreciated when arranged.

Informal learning is not always recognized as learning, but they claim the importance of being able to practice together with colleagues, observe and communicate with them. For newcomers, informal learning becomes a question of getting access to colleagues, and in my analysis a find that informal learning is at least equally important to formal learning. The problem can be that informal learning is not highlighted as important to knowledge sharing and knowledge development and therefore not recognized as important as formal training and courses. Thus, creating good learning arenas and appreciating colleagues taking initiative to work and learn through informal relations vary within different organizations and is more recognized among small groups and some leaders then as important characteristics of the organizations culture.

Newcomers believe that their colleagues represent the most important knowledge, and informally bounding with colleagues is important to their learning processes. However, getting access to colleagues they prefer represent a challenge, especially since it is more or less up to

the newcomer to build these relationships, and colleagues are quite busy. Newcomers are quite proactive and mostly take charge of own learning. That includes them being active in building informal relations and attaining informal groups at work but also quite independent in performing own tasks. At least that is what they report. I find that their need of knowledge mostly is obtained in relation to others, and that their independence mostly is related to proactivity and thereby ability to learn from and get access to colleagues, but informally. My conclusion is that we need to highlight learning as participation and informal learning as superior at work, as anchored in everyday practice, and thereby obtain necessary awareness also when facilitating newcomers learning processes. It is in the recognition and consciousness of the characteristics of informal learning we find the potential for improving the facilitation of newcomers learning at work.

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