Chapter 14
Making Sense of Surrounding Difference: Informal Learning in National Culture Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

Informal learning is the inevitable consequence of our attempts to make sense of the world in which we live. Sometimes, on critical reconsideration, informal learning is recognized as significant and intentional; sometimes, it is recognized as trivial and inconsequential. Informal learning generally lacks external organization, structure, or support; nevertheless, it is essential in interpreting experience and anticipating outcomes. This chapter considers informal learning generally and, more specifically, the ways in which transnational students studying in Prague learn about other national cultures and negotiate their cultural adaptation. Using the reflective journals of these students, the chapter explores their growing realization of difference and critical incidents in the process of cultural adaptation. The chapter argues that a greater appreciation of informal learning can provide synergistic opportunities for linking it with formal cross-cultural learning in ways that enrich and empower the learner.

INTRODUCTION

In considering a number of “troubling dualisms,” Hodkinson (2005) characterized the ways in which formal and informal learning have been defined, separated, and divided. He understood that formal learning “is planned, teacher-dominated, assessed and takes place in educational institutions, where learning is the prime official objective of activity”; whereas, informal learning is “unplanned, incidental, unassessed and uncontrolled by a teacher, and takes place in everyday life, where learning is not the primary purpose of the activities in which we engage” (p. 114).

For the individual, learning is a continuous process that takes place through ongoing interactions and world experiences. Learning is always situated, in the sense that “activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in
which they have meaning” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53). What has been learned is often only recognized – or becomes salient – when it is overlaid by socially constructed or institutionally engineered frameworks that acknowledge it and provide it with new meaning (Banks et al., 2007). Higher education, where learning is that “prime official objective of activity,” provides an epistemological framework for defining and recognizing formal learning; however, “beneath this visible educational pyramid, and usually ignored, unrecognized or taken for granted as simply day-to-day getting by, there are various other learning activities that constitute a huge submerged iceberg of informal learning” (Livingstone 2000, para. 3).

This chapter emerged from the author’s work in teaching Cross-Cultural Management (CCM) courses in Prague with the International Program of an American college. The CCM course is a standard part of most undergraduate Business Administration programs. Its inclusion in the curriculum recognizes increased globalization, and the need for students to develop competencies for communicating and managing across national culture difference (AACSB, 2011; Witte, 2010). However, the CCM course is often problematic, because “for understandable, systemic reasons, business schools tend to teach culture in simple-minded terms, glossing over nuances and ignoring complexities” (Osland & Bird, 2000, p. 67).

In many cases this simple-mindedness and glossing is because instructors and students have limited cross-culture experience, but it has also been suggested that “one could further argue that we are joined in this conspiracy to give culture a quick-and-dirty treatment by practitioners and students who are looking for ways to simplify and make sense of the world” (Osland & Bird, 2000, p. 67). This was not the situation in Prague. The course instructor had lived and worked in several countries for extended periods; course participants had come to study in Prague from many countries throughout Europe and Asia; and, nobody was looking for quick-and-dirty ways of simplifying the complexities of national culture.

The first section of the chapter provides a background by reviewing informal learning and its role in cultural and cross-cultural understanding. The second section presents some of the findings from a phenomenological study conducted with students in the CCM course. This study explored how these students came to informal appreciations of national culture, and how they attempted to negotiate their cultural adaptation. This section also includes teaching strategies and approaches for using informal learning to compliment, advance, and synergistically enhance the standard CCM course. The third section suggests future research directions that might be productively explored, while the chapter ends with a review of the material presented and points to future applications of the knowledge gained from this study.

BACKGROUND

Knowledge is continuously created and elaborated through experiential engagement in the lifeworld of the learner. Sometimes, the process of knowledge-creation is initiated purposefully with a specific intent; often, it is neither intended nor consciously directed. In some cases, learning takes place within a framework that specifies and supports it; in others, there is no defining social, organizational, or institutional framework. To better appreciate different ways of learning it might be useful to consider the following typography that uses the dimensions of learner intent and learning context:

- **Formal Learning:** The formality of these learning experiences lies in the contexts within which they occur. Formal learning takes place within a recognized educational framework: academic, professional, or vocational. In this context the learner
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