Chapter 15
Valuing and Evaluating Informal Learning in Workplace Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT
Informal and incidental learning are pervasive, organic, and managed by learners themselves. Communities of Practice (CoPs) rely on this intrinsically motivated learning for their vibrancy. Yet organizations have increasingly sought to set up, support, and leverage CoPs to meet performance goals. This chapter describes a model of CoPs in Catalan Public Administration and examines research in two departments to portray the tensions that may emerge when informal learning is mandated and credentialed. Specifically, the purpose of the chapter is to examine how CoPs can be designed to support organic learning and how such learning can be evaluated. The authors discuss implications for future research around underlying processes and principles that might address tensions in organization-based CoPs, evaluation of learning transfer in open-ended learning contexts using a theory of change approach, and insight into links between informal learning and dimensions of a learning organization.

INTRODUCTION
In this chapter, we discuss research on two CoPs to portray tensions that grow out of the formalization of informal learning. Our objectives, specifically, are to answer the following questions:

- In what ways can CoPs be designed to address the tension that is inevitable when organic community-based structures serve both the intrinsic learning needs of volunteer participants and the performance-oriented yardstick of organizations that support these structures?

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• How can evaluation of informal learning, especially when it takes place through social interaction with others, assist the organization in understanding the value such informal learning has for individuals, the groups to which they belong, and the organization as a whole?

• What are implications for future research directions?

Marsick and Watkins (2014) discuss the pervasiveness of informal and incidental learning at work, noting that as much as 80% of work-based learning is recognized as informal. Moreover, as Brown and Duguid (1991) observed, much informal learning at work is narrative, collaborative, and socially constructed. Eraut (2004) found that much professional learning occurs through (1) participation in group activities, (2) working alongside others, (3) tackling challenging tasks, and (4) working with clients. Even though professionals learn most by modifying or expanding knowledge and skills when confronting challenges, they are highly influenced by these surrounding social and cultural circumstances. Thus, existing socio-cultural norms, power dynamics, and organizational rewards and expectations indirectly shape choices about what is worth learning, be that through formal or informal means.

In this chapter we examine informal learning in the context of Communities of Practice (CoPs) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). CoPs advance learning and knowledge, but they can also socialize members into uncritical adoption of dominant values, norms, and viewpoints. Informal learning can be deliberately encouraged by an organization through intentionally-designed CoPs (Archibald & McDermott, 2010). When organizations get involved in CoPs, tensions can arise between the natural proclivities of learners and the mandates of organizations that seek to reach particular goals for which they employ staff. Organizations have tried to “formalize” informal learning, which is often vibrant because it is NOT so organized. It is organic and controlled primarily by learners; although the subtleties of power dynamics can lead individuals to uncritically pursue a learning agenda that is influenced by dominant ideologies and cultures.

This chapter explores these tensions by examining research emanating from newly instituted CoPs in the Catalan Public Administration (Spain) (Gairín, Fernández-de-Álava, Barrera-Corominas, Rodríguez-Gómez, Martínez, & Giménez, 2011). We also draw on CoPs in a not-for-profit youth organization (Marsick & Davis-Manigaulte, 2012) and in the U.S. Army—which also pioneered CoPs in the federal government, albeit in a different cultural and organizational context (Dixon, Burgess, Kilner & Schweitzer, 2005)—to illustrate these tensions.

BACKGROUND

Informal Learning at Work

A first step in assessing informal learning is to define it. At its heart, informal learning is learning from experience. At work, informal learning is typically prompted by challenges (that are sought or imposed) and undertaken in social contexts, though not always through collaboration. Tacit knowledge and learning are often drawn upon in the moment with little awareness. Knowledge gained may not be codified, and is often situated. Incidental learning—a byproduct of another activity—can easily occur, not necessarily with high levels of recognition or intention.

Marsick and Watkins (1990) found that informal learning could be enhanced by proactivity, creativity, and critical reflectivity. Marsick and Watkins (1990, 2014) have defined it in contrast to formal learning:

Informal learning, a category that includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but it is not typically classroom-based or highly
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