Abstract:

The Centre for Education and Work conducted an audit of informal learning in six workplaces. These assessments were done in collaboration with over 48 individual workers in entry-level positions. The results of the research indicate that considerable informal learning takes place in all sectors and workplaces. However, not all workplaces acknowledge, value or recognize this learning. Ultimately, in some workplaces, learning is secretive or hidden. This paper provides a theoretical framework for examining secretive learning as well as some potential directions for recognizing learning in the workplace.

Introduction

Canadian governments, workplaces, and educational institutions are using the rhetoric of the “knowledge economy” and ‘life long learning’ to describe a range of learning activities for adults. Various researchers have described learning activities through a spectrum of formal learning, informal learning, and incidental learning. (Livingstone, 1999: Watkins & Marsick, 1992; Cseh et al, 1999). Although research on training and learning in the workplace is not new, research in informal learning is. Informal learning is now recognized (Livingstone, 1999) as an active part of most workplaces. Most adults self-identify informal learning as their most common workplace learning experience. Workplaces are encouraged to support and develop informal learning practices. Whether they actually do so is another question.
Livingstone (2001) describes informal learning as “any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria.” This implies learner control and learner direction versus learning proscribed through formal training or course work. Most particularly, informal learning includes “unanticipated experiences and encounters that result in learning as an incidental by-product, which may or may not be consciously recognized” (Colley, et.al. 2002).

The Centre for Education and Work, a not-for-profit educational organization in Winnipeg, has conducted a study of the informal learning practices of employees in small and medium sized businesses. This study has found that regardless of employer support, employees have developed sophisticated systems of informal learning. Indeed, in workplaces where informal learning is neither supported nor recognized by the employer, employees developed secretive learning systems to ensure that information shared amongst employees went undetected by their employer. These informal and “secretive learning” systems provide valuable and untapped potential and opportunity for the improvement of workplace training and the development of a skilled workforce within organizations.

It is my contention that workers maintain a greater sense of perceived control of their work situation, work spaces, and work relationships if their learning remains a secret. Secrecy may be destructive if the learning is dangerous or threatening to the safety of others. In our research, no learning appeared to be of this nature. Rather management either ignored the learning because it was not brought to their attention, or workers maintained secretive knowledge to protect themselves because of an arbitrary company policy.

However, secrecy can also have a negative side. The individual may feel a sense of guilt or shame at keeping secrets, or the secret divides the worker from the company and a sense of productive work. Secreptive learning also relegates positive learning experiences to “illegitimate knowledge” which then lessens the impact of the learning milieu. Workers are liable to dismiss these knowledges as less important.

Auditing Informal Learning

In 2002-2003, the Centre for Education and Work (CEW) conducted a qualitative research study to identify specific skills and knowledge that employees acquire informally in the workplace. The study sought to identify the specific skills, knowledge, and abilities learned informally in small and medium sized workplaces and to determine how employees were learning these specific skills in the workplace.

The working definition of informal learning used throughout this study was:
Learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family, or leisure. Learning that is not structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional, incidental or random.

This study included surveys, participant observations, and interviews with both management and employees. Thirty surveys were conducted with management in Manitoba and Saskatchewan workplaces. Twelve worksites were audited, including participant observations and interviews with 46 employees.

Because earlier research had focused on management and professional business learning (banking, insurance, etc.), we focused on entry-level workers in small and medium sized businesses. The audits were all conducted with businesses with less than 500 people; the majority had less than 100 people. A variety of sectors were surveyed including agri-foods, manufacturing, wood industry, entertainment, health care, trades, hospitality, retail sales, service, business, communication, banking, and transport.

**Methodology of the Audit**

A common Audit Protocol, was used by all project researchers. Within the Audit Protocol, we developed a number of overarching categories for identifying learning activities and learning processes. The paradigm included technical skills, Essential Skills (e.g. reading, writing, numeracy), interpersonal skills, intra-personal skills, and knowledge of workplace culture. We developed a survey instrument to identify how aware employers were about informal learning and the potential variety of learning events for entry-level workers.

The audit was field tested to validate the methodology. Researchers compiled company histories wherever possible in order to approach the companies with an informed background on production, human resource needs, competitors, etc. Participant observations, interviews, consent forms and essential skills profiles were completed on site. All field notes were transcribed and a data analysis chart was completed for each audit. The data analysis was subsequently returned to the workplace to be validated by the participants.

**Factors considered for the audit selection**

The employees were selected for the audit because they knew their jobs and performed them well. We did not interview neophytes or less experienced people. We emphasized to the employee that this research was not just a reflection of how well they did their job but what knowledge they had acquired to do the job and how they acquired this knowledge. Employees were pleased to be identified in this manner and collaborated freely throughout all the audits.
The audit locations were chosen carefully. The workplace needed to be a learning environment that was open to the recognition of employee’s prior learning. We wanted to ensure that the organizations involved did not see this research as a threat or judgment as to how well the organization was run. We also ensured that the organizations involved knew how this research would benefit their organization. During the audit process, management was available to answer questions and add to the data.

Because of time limits, we identified four entry-level job classifications for each site. The categories used in the audit were linked to the categories derived from the survey grid in phase one. These included technical skills, computer use, document use, numeracy, oral communication, working with others, thinking skills including problem solving, critical thinking, decision making, and corporate culture.

**Findings from the Workers’ Perspectives**

**Much Learning Takes Place through Informal Mentoring**

Contrary to management expectations, workers most frequently learn their jobs through informal mentoring (or asking questions of co-workers), observation, and trial and error. Supports for any of these approaches are rare. Mentors are often created from those individuals with likeable personalities who are willing to support co-workers. The mentoring is not formal, nor does the company acknowledge this role. Rather, informal relationships are built which enable the newer worker to gain understandings of the job, the workplace culture, and the “unwritten” requirements and restrictions. Workers without informal mentors take longer to learn their jobs and learn them with less confidence.

**Informal Mentoring Results in More Successful Employees**

The more successful employees (viewed by themselves and others as knowing the job) were supported and mentored on the job. In the main, this mentoring was not a formal assignment through management, but was a part of supporting new employees by people who were willing and able to provide this support. Mentoring might include helping newer employees “understand the ropes," shortcuts to work tasks and activities, ideas for dealing with problems, examples of similar problems in the past, etc.

Mentors were not necessarily ‘senior’ people, although they usually had a respectable time in the job.

**Demonstration of Leadership Skills**

Many workers take on leadership capacities (such as mentoring), filling in when others are absent, explaining processes to others, etc. These are frequently not
noticed and certainly not acknowledged by management. To be fair, management may not even know that these events are taking place. However, because management is convinced that line workers are not demonstrating leadership qualities, it is not surprising that these capacities are overlooked.

Importance of Problem Solving

Employees found most learning to be reactive to a given problem or situation. As one supervisor put it, we “handle angry customers and need to see the situation and how they react to determine how to handle it. Each situation is different.”

At the same time, this learning was often not shared with others in a formal manner. For example in one company the machines would often breakdown. The more experienced operators would know what caused the breakages from prior experience and could, if requested, provide suggestions for how these problems could be overcome.

Cross Learning Occurs in Many Workplaces

A common term in workplace training is cross training. Cross training occurs when a workplace re-organizes or re-engineers the workplace. It may be an initiative to allow one worker to step into the work of another who is sick or on vacation. It may also allow for workers to take on new or alternative job responsibilities. Senior management usually dictates cross training in an effort to address human resource needs within the company.

On the other hand, successful employees consistently reported what we identified as cross learning. These workers regularly learned how to step into other jobs in order to help co-workers out, provide back-up, and provide flexibility to colleagues and co-workers. This cross learning was not usually directed by senior management but undertaken voluntarily by workers in order to understand the jobs of others in their work sections or teams. These workers felt that cross learning enabled them to contribute to the work of the company in a larger context. Often the cross learning was indirectly learned and not intentional.

Clearly, cross learning opportunities make for a richer, more widely informed workplace. They enable workers to build a wider framework for understanding the business plans and strategies of their workplaces and invest them in the overall quality of services and products.

Secretive learning

In spite of theoretical constructs that “Informal learning is not only more common, but also more effective than formal learning (Colley, et al. 2002), employees have told us that few employers support informal learning in the workplace. Rarely is
learning evaluated and recognized in any identifiable way. This is particularly true for companies organized in a more hierarchical way. If chains of command exist, then less recognition of learning occurs. If the organization has “flatter” or less hierarchical structures, then informal learning tends to be more recognized and encouraged.

Most of the employers in our study believe that learning on the job comes through formal training provided either by the company or through post-secondary education. In many cases, employers value technical competence as being the measure of a successful employee. This is contrary to the experience and reality of employees.

Some workplaces, however, even though they may espouse and support “learning” in the workplace, do not really want or expect employees to learn. There are some instances, and our current research is supporting this, that people learn in spite of the dictum not to. Some learning, therefore, is secretive learning. Let me give you a few examples.

**Corporation A:**

Corporation A is a large fast food empire with thousands of outlets across the world. Corporation A has a policy of ‘training all employees so they will not need to learning anything else to do the job.” The corporation assumes that once employees are trained no new learning will/can interfere with their performance.

The introductory story for this article showed how “Charlie,” who was thoroughly trained and experienced as a worker, developed new approaches to his job, which he had learned informally. Because the company does not expect Charlie to “learn” on the job, he must be secretive about his learning.

**Corporation B:**

Corporation B is a large airline operating internationally in Canada and the U.S.A. During a flight out of a major city in the U.S., the ground crew made this announcement. “We would like to turn this flight around as quickly as possible because of ground delays. So, we are going to ask a favour of you. We are going to load the plane from the windows, then the middle seats, then the aisle seats. We know that if we load the plane this way, we can get you all in your seats in ten minutes. So, please look at your ticket and will all the window seats (A and/or F) please take your seats now.”

And so, it proceeded. The windows were loaded, then the middle seats, then the aisle seats. I went up and said to one of the attendants, “That’s the smartest thing I’ve ever seen an airline do.”
The attendant said to me, “Will you let my manager over there know that? We may get complaints because this is against company policy.”

In this case, in order to process the customer more efficiently and effectively, employees were risking “going against company policy.” Employees knew a better way to have passengers get on the plane, but were encumbered by policies. If they applied their new knowledge, they would get in trouble.

Corporation C:

A small pulp and paper mill has a workforce that has invented their own sign language to communicate in a very noisy environment. No one told them about this sign language or that they would need to learn it on the job. Workers invented it as a way of communicating, especially urgent or emergency problems. Interestingly, the workers use this same sign language outside of work if they happen to see each other in the community.

This innovative and imaginative workplace learning is neither noticed nor recognized by managers or decision makers. These same managers contend that little learning or creative problem solving is used by front line workers.

Theories of Secrets

Much knowledge in the workplace is tacit or unconscious. However, the learning described by workers in our study indicated they were well aware of specific learning, and, at times, this was hidden from management either purposefully or because it was deemed irrelevant by supervisors and management. All the workers we encountered liked their jobs. They believed that they were doing valuable work and work that took ingenuity, imagination, and dedication. However, these qualities were often not appreciated by their bosses or supervisors who felt front line workers did not need to demonstrate ‘leadership’ qualities. So, although a workforce may create new knowledge, it may not be recognized nor valued.

Secretive learning is a potentially positive force for the worker. The worker can have some control over workspaces and places in order to make these spaces more efficient, more productive, or more collegial. In the cases for our study, learning was more secretive in companies that expressed differences in policy (“this is how we do things here”) or pragmatics (this way is the way we do things here). Workers learned new or different ways to do their jobs in order to work effectively and efficiently. They often shared these practices with co-workers, but not with upper management.

What particularly emerges in this framework is the struggle between knowledges in the workforce. Foucault in Power and Knowledge (1980) explored what he termed “subjugated knowledges” which in the past were present but disguised.
He discusses the relation of bodies of formal “knowledge”, commonly academic or scientific knowledge, as opposed to local popular knowledges. Foucault suggests that a “genealogical project” is needed to unpack the various roads to knowledge construction and knowledge recognition. For Foucault such a project “entertains the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierachise and order them in the name of some true knowledge ….” (p.83)

We found that workers often have these “illegitimate knowledges” which are either ignored or distained by management because of attitudes of dismissal or status. In cases of secretive learning, management does not believe that workers know as much as they do. Nor does management think that a wide variety of learning happens in the workplace.

At the same time, secrets protect us from the malevolence or manipulations of others. If we withhold knowledge from those who have other controls over us, we maintain a sense of control over our domains. Sissela Bok (1982), a moral philosopher, agrees that secrets provide the holder of the secret with a certain kind of power.

To be able to hold back some information about oneself or to channel it and thus influence how one is seen by others gives power. (p 19)

A number of social psychologists contend that perceived control is a fundamental aspect of human motivation (Perry, 1991; Bandura, 1977; Taylor, 1990). People with a satisfactory level of perceived control can cope better with stressful situations (Thompson, et al, 1994). They feel better able to manage their lives, and, thus, tend to have behavioural and emotional outcomes consistent with their sense of control (Perry, 1991). Perceived personal control describes a continuum of controllability that extends from mastery to helplessness. A high degree of perceived control is maintained if individuals can predict the outcomes of events, and they can influence the environment sufficiently to control the outcomes.

We found that most workers seek to have perceived control over their work domains. This provides them with both job autonomy and job success. By adding secretive learning to the skills already acquired in training and/or on the job learning, workers get more control over the work they do. In turn, their loyalty to quality production and productivity increases.

Secrecy often has a negative connotation. Holders of secrets may feel guilty or ashamed for holding secrets. In the case of workplace secretive learning, individuals hide their knowledges from management in order to protect themselves or because their knowledge is not treated as valid or valuable. Workers who need to maintain secretive learning do so because they can
maintain a sense of perceived control in areas that a knowledge struggle is apparent.

**Conclusions**

Canadian workplaces hold incredible potential as learning spaces and places. However, the knowledge created and developed in workplaces is rarely valued or placed in a meaningful context for either employers or workers. Workplaces that foster secretive learning are missing opportunities for engendering effective and smart workplaces. In an era of industrial competition and pressures on productivity retaining a healthy productive workforce is imperative for companies to exist.

While there are many approaches and methods needed to develop healthy workplaces, acknowledging, encouraging, and exploring, and assessing informal learning can provide avenues for increasing worker satisfaction and worker support. Bond, et. Al. (2004) contend that one of six criteria for effective workplaces includes “creating learning opportunities and challenges on the job—where employees can grow, learn and advance (p.3).” Assessing informal learning presents workplaces with processes and practices for identifying and supporting learning. Effective workplaces need to develop ways of validating and acknowledging that learning in some fashion through internal or external recognition systems.

When workers hide their learning they may be forming potential resistance in the knowledge power wars that exist in workplaces. These resistances may be useful and necessary for individual survival. However, they do deplete valuable energy and resourcefulness that is not being effectively developed by those workplaces.
Bibliography


