Contextual Factors Influencing Informal Workplace Learning: The Case of ‘Open to the Light College’

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Abstract

The workplace has always been considered an important context for adult learning and work itself has been conceived as a rich source for learning (Boud & Middleton, 2003; Brockman & Dirkx, 2006; Collin, 2002; Marsick, 2009). Workplace learning can take many forms and often occurs on continuum from formal, organizationally-sponsored training and human resource development initiatives, to informal and incidental learning which occurs naturally as employees respond to problems and challenges embedded in their work which may require a need for learning (Collin & Tynjala, 2003; Watkins, 1998). Research, however, has suggested that informal workplace learning takes
precedence over formal workplace learning, and that as much as 60 to 80 percent of the learning that occurs in today’s workplaces is informal (Koopmans, Doornbos & van Eekelen, 2006).

Yet, despite the proliferation of informal learning in the workplace, additional research on the topic is still needed to better understand conditions associated with workplace learning. Scholars have increasingly acknowledged the importance of contextual factors that influence informal learning (Ashton, 2004; Skule, 2004; Sambrook, 2005; Sambrook & Stewart, 2000). Specifically, Goldman, Plack, Roche, Smith and Turley (2009) and Lohman (2006) call for more research that examines how certain characteristics of workers and their work environment influence their engagement in informal workplace learning. Over the years, research has examined informal workplace learning within various organizational settings such as business and industry, healthcare, and other professional contexts. Some attention has been given to exploring informal learning among teachers and the environmental influences associated with such learning in public schools (Hoekstra, Korthagen, Brekelmans, Beijaard, & Imants, 2009; Jurasaite-Harbinson, 2009; Lohman, 2000; Lohman, 2003; Lohman, 2006; Lohman & Woolf, 2001; McNally, Blake, & Reid, 2009). However, informal learning among staff members and administrators in community colleges has been under explored. Therefore there is a compelling need to broaden the conception of workplaces to include different types of educational settings beyond the notion of the public school system.

Accordingly, with the objective of examining the contextual factors influencing informal learning in an educational setting, a qualitative case study data set was collected in a purposefully selected community college. The study was underpinned by Marsick and Watkins’ reconceptualized model of informal and incidental learning (Cseh, Watkins & Marsick, 1999) and the research questions were: what are the contextual factors that influence informal learning; and how do contextual factors influence informal learning. A total of 15 interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of staff members and administrators identified as being committed lifelong learners and exemplary facilitators of other’s learning. The interviews have been transcribed and preliminary data analysis has been initiated and is ongoing. It is anticipated that findings will be available for presentation and publication. The significance of this study lies in its focus on further exploring contextual factors that influence informal workplace learning which has been an area of research warranting attention as articulated in the scholarly research. Further, exploring this phenomena in a community college setting, a particularly under-researched context with regard to informal learning, will also expand our understanding of informal workplace learning beyond industry contexts which have been a predominant focus in the literature.

Keywords: informal workplace learning, contextual factors, community college
The workplace has always been considered an important context for adult learning and work itself has been conceived as a rich source for learning (Boud & Middleton, 2003; Brockman & Dirkx, 2006; Collin, 2002; Marsick, 2009). Workplace learning can take many forms and often occurs on a continuum from formal, organizationally-sponsored training and human resource development initiatives, to informal and incidental learning which occurs naturally as employees respond to problems and challenges embedded in their work which may require a need for learning (Collin & Tynjala, 2003; Watkins, 1998). Research, however, has suggested that informal workplace learning takes precedence over formal workplace learning, and that as much as 60 to 80 percent of the learning that occurs in today’s workplaces is informal (Koopmans, Doornbos & van Eekelen, 2006).

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Therefore, the purpose of the study was to examine the contextual factors influencing informal learning in an educational setting.

Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

The study was underpinned by Marsick and Watkins’ reconceptualized model of informal and incidental learning (Cseh, Watkins & Marsick, 1999). This model is characterized as a problem solving model that is not straightforward or prescriptive. In this model, informal learning is influenced by how people frame a situation which is typically a non-routine problem. Strategies for resolving the problem are considered often with the presence of action and reflection as well as intended and unintended consequences when
learning strategies are deployed. While context is implicit in the model, its influence on the phases of the learning process have not been entirely evident. The research questions addressed in this study were: (1) what are the contextual factors that influence informal learning; and, (2) how do contextual factors influence informal learning.

Design of the Study

A qualitative case study design was considered optimal for this study because case studies enable researchers to “understand the processes of events, projects, and programs and to discover context characteristics that will shed light on an issue or object” (Sanders, 1981, cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 33). Two levels of sampling were required. One level involved the purposeful selection of the case organization, and the next level of sampling involved the purposeful selection of participants within the organization. Two criteria were established to identify the case organization. The organization had to espouse a philosophy and commitment to employee development by implementing strategies consistent with the literature on learning oriented organizations and it needed to be geographically accessible in the Eastern region of the United States. A community college was recommended to the researcher as being a possible candidate for the study. The primary researcher’s intent was to explore the organizational contextual factors as they influence employees’ informal learning within this organization so an intensity purposeful sampling strategy was then used within this selected educational institution to identify information-rich cases. Nominations of staff members and administrators were obtained. These nominated participants had to be considered committed lifelong learners and had to be viewed as exemplary facilitators of others’ learning. The primary approaches to data collection included a modification of the Critical Incident Technique and semi-structured, personal, face-to-face interviews. A total of 15 interviews were conducted by the primary researcher, were recorded with the participants’ permission and were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist.

Data Analysis

Preliminary data analysis has been initiated an ongoing. Content analysis and constant comparative analysis are the primary approaches to data analysis that are being used. It is anticipated that some preliminary data from some of the interviews will be shared with conference attendees.

Contributions to New Knowledge in HRD

The significance of this study lies in its focus on further exploring contextual factors that influence informal workplace learning which has been an area of research warranting attention as articulated in the scholarly research. Further, exploring this phenomena in a community college setting, a particularly under-researched context with regard to informal learning, will also expand our understanding of informal workplace learning beyond industry contexts which have been a predominant focus in the literature.
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