



Theoretical framework (work package 3)

Project 'Putting informal learning into practice'

Leonardo Da Vinci Programme NL/08/LLP-LdV/TOI/123015

funded by



[This publication provides only the views of the authors. The European Commission cannot be held liable for any use that may be made of this information]

Contents

1. Background.....	3
2. Learning – formal learning – non-formal learning – informal learning.....	5
3. Extent of formality of learning activities and the concept of 'informal learning' in the project partner countries.....	6
4. “Informal learning” project definition.....	7
Sources.....	8

1. Background

Not only do people learn at school, institutes of higher education and universities, they also learn on their jobs, at home, when dealing with partners, competitors, neighbours, strangers, in associations, in their free time, and elsewhere. The learning process is based on a natural curiosity and an existential pursuit of participation in a complex, often untransparent, fragile and threatening environment.

Children want to know much. They are curious about what happens in their daily environment. They often 'annoy' adults with their 'why' questions. Usually, they lose that curiosity after the first years at school. They often leave school with an overdose of answers they never wanted to know and will never need in their lives. Consequently, restoring that natural curiosity and motivation to continue learning as an adult is particularly difficult. Nevertheless, curiosity is essential to successful learning. Learning is necessary to live and survive.

More than half of human learning processes take place outside education. However, all too often only results of formal learning are recognised and rewarded in society. That's why, in that same society, there is an (unjust) difference between talent valued by means of school certificates and talent valued by means of sheer experience.

In most of the cases, the skills and competences, which are the result of informal learning (inside as well as outside the school), do not receive the attention and recognition they deserve. Hence, it is important to promote the recognition of the results of informal learning in the work place and look for ways to encourage informal learning.

Moreover, the situation in the work place has changed drastically over the last couple of years. Today, companies, enterprises, organisations, institutes, the government, etc are continuously confronted with changes. The idea that continuous change is normal has increasingly gained acceptance. However, today the pace at which consecutive changes in life and labour organisations come about, quickens enormously. Due to the unpredictability of many a change, labour organisations face a new and vital challenge.

If we want to avoid being taken off guard by those quick and significant changes, we must develop the capability within the organisation to deal with changes. We must develop strategies to find answers and grasp opportunities. Developing talents and competences is such a strategy. It requires motivation and the will to change.

Today's global economy is increasingly more based on labour organisations in which information, knowledge, development and modernisation play a crucial role. Large and small companies and services are challenged - and indeed forced - to operate in an open market and must integrate their business processes to meet the demands and expectations of the new and critical customer in an effective way. The most successful labour organisations improve their relations with clients, launch innovative quality products and services onto the market, and work on a combination of high quality, low costs and short lead times. To achieve that goal they stimulate and make use of the competences and motivation of their staff.

The changeover to a knowledge-based economy, indeed, has turned 'human capital' into the resource *par excellence*. Moreover, due to the combination of economic growth, the maintenance of our current level of prosperity combined with low birth rates and the massive retirement of the baby boom generation, that resource will become ever scarcer. Slowly, we enter a period of labour shortage. Consequently, each potential talent will have to be used and developed.

Moreover, labour organisations can no longer guarantee lifelong careers or job security (and today's staff does no longer pledge lifelong loyalty either). Notwithstanding that, it is possible for an individual to build a lifelong career if he wants to develop continuously, even if that consists of consecutive jobs with consecutive employers. What people learnt during their years at school must be completed with lifelong learning and developing.

A lot is learnt on the job. The nature of the job heavily determines if we learn on the job. An ever larger part of labour in our society and economy is knowledge-intensive, more complex, less routine, more liable to changing productivity requirements, has to do with close cooperation, ...

The foregoing directly affects the approach to the way we should learn. There is growing awareness that we cannot solely rely on traditional book learning before we enter the labour market. It is indispensable that we learn 'on' the job and 'thanks to' the job. That learning process should be lifelong.

Today, the workplace turns out to be the pre-eminent learning situation in quickly changing labour organisations. Workplace learning is high on the agenda. In addition, there is growing attention for the learning processes that are the result of the work activities themselves (the professional environment as learning environment) and that are often not described as learning processes by the people involved.

The learning process of workers consists of no less than 94 per cent of informal learning. This rather surprising conclusion was drawn by the Researchinstituut voor Onderwijs en Arbeidsmarkt (ROA / *Research Institute for Education and Labour Market*) of the Universiteit Maastricht (2008). Other interesting findings of the ROA research project are the following:

- Informal learning is best done on the job.
- It is true for all age categories that employed persons develop more than non-employed persons. Not working during one year equals – as far as knowledge development is concerned – half a year less education.

The PILIP project aims to respond to that situation. The collaboration with different partners from 5 European countries aims to provide a survey of best practices and existing tools that can be used to stimulate informal learning at the workplace. In this way, we can contribute to unlocking the learning potential of each working day and each work situation.

Before we can start with listing the best practices, it is of vital importance to establish a coherent framework for informal learning. The existing literature does not give a generally accepted definition to work with. That's why, in the course of the present project, we will use a 'project definition' based on certain criteria.

2. Learning – formal learning – non-formal learning – informal learning

Learning is generally understood as the process that changes the knowledge base in an individual or community and leads to a sustainable result. Schooling, training and education all have to do with influencing the learning process. Formal, non-formal and informal learning result from the notion of 'éducation permanente' (*continuing education*). 'Education', in this context, refers to learning at school and not to the learning process. Indeed, it refers to the educational offer. In other words: 'education' is about the conditions you create to enable learning.

Below is a list of the most important criteria and features that characterise the three forms of learning. The list sheds more light on the differences between them.

Characteristics: Formal learning

- Formal learning is organised and offered
- Formal learning creates an environment that specifically aims at advancing learning; it uses a certain system that includes a certain order and programme and works towards a certain goal, intends to bring across well-defined content, etc.
- Consequently, the offer is systematic and can be justified and evaluated
- There is a civil effect attached to it, such as a diploma, brevet or certificate that is accepted by educational institutions and employers.
- Third parties that organise education with a view to knowledge development or competence enhancement are involved
- There are training programmes and a number of supervised formal learning courses at the workplace:
 - the stress is on knowledge development in project groups, workshops, workplaces for method development, practice-oriented research, and action research
 - examples of courses that focus on competence enhancement are courses, distance learning, learning assignments, and internships

Characteristics: Non-formal learning

- A learning environment and an offer are created although the offer is not well-defined and does not have a prescribed programme
- In general, non-formal learning does not lead to a certificate or diploma
- Formal and non-formal programmes may be full time / part time, evening or day courses, inside or outside office hours, or on one's own initiative or may be imposed (by someone else)

Characteristics: Informal learning

- Is a learning process that is the result of daily activities that relate to work, family or leisure activities
- Is about acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes based on the experiences gained every day when confronted with the environment, possibly apart from an educational activity
- Is a learning system where coaching by colleagues or experts from work may play an important role. However, it may also be learning in the family or circle of friends (with or without coaching). It is a learning system that bears the mark of self-steered or independent learning.
- Is not offered by an institute or organisation
- Is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time, or learning support
- In most cases the initiative to learn is taken by the learner; however, organising the learning process may be a conscious decision
- There are no certificates awarded

3. Extent of formality of learning activities and the concept of 'informal learning' in the project partner countries

On the basis of the listed features and criteria, the participating project institutes in Flanders, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Great Britain examined to which extent learning activities are formal or informal. The criteria below were used. All institutes examined whether the distinguishing characteristics were applicable or not.

	Formal learning	Informal learning
Definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentional learning activities • Structured by lecturer • Lecturer-centred • Coaching by lecturer/mentor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentional learning activities • Spill-over effect of the job (and daily life) • Learner-centred • Coaching by colleague(s) (in the event of informal learning at the workplace)
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official assessment • Location of the programme • Structured curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No assessment • Work place • No specific curriculum
Place and setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External certification • Learning is primary objective • Previously established goals • Expert knowledge • Codified knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No assessment • Objectives of work is primary objective • Flexible / ad hoc objectives • Practical Knowledge • Individual / implicit knowledge
Programme content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal knowledge with high status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily / pragmatic knowledge

After: Colley et al., 2003

The result of this examination turns out to be very interesting. In all countries, participating institutes indicate that the distinguishing characteristics of formal and informal learning are applicable. In some institutes certain criteria are sometimes more or sometimes less relevant. Based on the features of informal learning mentioned above as well as on the results of the examination, the following definition of informal learning was formulated for the PILIP project.

4. “Informal learning” project definition

Learning is generally understood as the process that changes the knowledge base in an individual or community and leads to a sustainable result.

- Informal learning is the result of the daily activities of the individual in personal, familial, professional, and social contexts. In a spontaneous and voluntary manner people are stimulated in their educational, developmental and experiential processes. People learn lifelong.
- Learning that takes place in a situation that was not created to that end and, consequently, has a certain degree of coincidence in it. Examples would be exchanging information in a team meeting, from trying something out during an assignment, from a conversation during a coffee break, or from asking a colleague to help solve a problem.
- Informal learning in the workplace is encouraged (and confined) by the structure of employment and by a culture of a stimulating (learning) environment.
- Informal learning by the employee depends on his / her competencies and motivation. In other words, the impact of informal learning is determined by the capacity of individuals to reflect, to make something more explicit, to self-steering, and to the possibility of participation in a social process.

Sources

- Baert H., Gielen H., Lauwers B., Van Bree L. (2007): Leren van en met elkaar op de werkplek. Kluwer
- Calmeyn, H., De Witte, K. & Weverbergh, J. (Reds.) (2008): Licht op leren. Leren en ontwikkelen in een talentgerichte maatschappij. Leuven: LannooCampus
- Colley, H., Hodkinson, P., Malcom, J. (2002): Non-formal learning: mapping the conceptual terrain, a consultation report. Leeds: Lifelong Learning Institute University of Leeds
- De Vries A. (2004): Ervaringsleren cultiveren. Onderzoek in eigen werk met praktijkvoorbeelden uit de zorg, onderwijs, landbouw en management, Eburon Academic Publishers
- Gielen H. (2005): Peterschap in ondernemingen. Een praktische handleiding voor het begeleiden van het leren op de werkplek, Acco Uitgeverij
- <http://www.vov.be/werkplek/index.htm>
- Koopmans H. (2006): Professionals organiseren informeel leren. Onderzoek naar het organiseren van informeel leren en de manier waarop managers en opleidingsdeskundigen dit kunnen optimaliseren, Eburon Academic Publishers
- Onstenk J. (1997): Lerend leren werken. Brede vakbekwaamheid en de integratie van leren, werken en innoveren, Eburon Academic Publishers
- Streumer J & M. (2007): Leren op de werkplek. Elsevier Uitgeverij