Revising the Watkins and Marsick Informal Learning Model:

The Centrality of Frames of Reference

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Scholars contend that individuals learn on a continual basis through their interaction in their environment (Dewey, 1938; Jarvis, 2006; Marsick, 2009). This learning may take many forms but in most cases it is informal learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). This type of learning is often historically linked to the works of Lindeman (1926) and Dewey (1938) which emphasized the importance of learning from experience and the role of reflective thought in the learning process. Informal learning has become the focus of considerable attention because of the recognition that learning is “lifewide, taking place at work and elsewhere” (Ellinger, 2005; Skule, 2004, p. 8; Marsick, Watkins, Callahan, & Volpe, 2006).

Research has suggested that informal learning is one of the most predominant forms of learning that occurs among adults in the workplace, accounting for as much as 80% of the learning (Ellinger & Cseh, 2007). Informal learning may be structured or unstructured, unintended and incidental, or part of a planned activity, and is generally considered to be in the control of the learner (Eraut, 2004; Marsick, 2009). As individuals encounter various experiences, they are challenged to learn and make sense of the experience, or to informally learn and resolve aspects of their own experience (Brockman & Dirkx, 2006). Informal learning is situated in a variety of contexts and is influenced by a number of economic, social, cultural, and historical factors that are present in an individual’s social, cultural, and historical settings (Cseh, Watkins & Marsick, 1999; Ellinger, 2005; Marsick et al., 2006; Jurasaite-Harbison, 2009; Marsick, 2009). Despite a large and growing base of literature examining many facets of informal learning, several scholars have acknowledged the need to develop more holistic understandings of this form of learning because it is critical to the
development of professional knowledge and expertise (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003; Marsick, 2000).

Overview of Design, Data Collection, and Analysis

A dissertation was designed accordingly to explore the influence of individual frames of reference on the informal learning process given the calls for research (Goldman, Plack, Roche, Smith, & Turley, 2009; Lohman, 2006). Underpinned theoretically by the Cseh, Watkins and Marsick (1999) model of informal and incidental learning, an instrumental qualitative case study design was used as an approach that promoted an in-depth exploration and understanding of the influence of frames of reference on the process of informal learning (Ellinger, Watkins, & Marsick, 2005; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995). Research indicates that opportunities for informal learning are most frequent in non-routine, unstable environments where prescribed processes and procedures fail to provide adequate means of understanding situations or strategy development to resolve problems that are encountered (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Therefore, the research setting selected for this study was an aviation training unit which provided an unstable complex environment and novice practitioners as flight instructors engaged in their early teaching experience. Ten newly certified flight instructors, five women and five men, were purposefully selected as participants based on an intensity sampling strategy (Patton, 2002). Frames of reference are a product of an individual’s perceptions of a context while context is an expression of the sociocultural, socio-historical, and environmental facets as perceived by the individual as one assigns meaning to these phenomena (Lewin, 1974; Marsick, 2009; Mezirow, 2000; Rogoff, 2003). In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to explicate the participants’ frames of reference by a learning biography. Their informal learning was illuminated through their articulation of the problems that they met in their early teaching experience. This provided a
comprehensive view of the experience and context of the individual and allowed examination of the interwoven aspects that influence the informal learning process. Additionally, participant observation and a document review provided insight into the daily activity of the participants and delineated the operational context of the organization and workplace in which the informal learning was directly situated. Constant comparative analysis was used to analyze the data.

**Findings**

This study illuminated the participants’ development of frames of reference and delineated their engagement in informal learning in this unique workplace setting. Further, this study illuminated the influence of the participants’ frames of reference on their informal learning process while illustrating the reciprocal influence of informal learning on the frames of reference of these participants. Additionally, the findings of this study highlighted the integral position of frames of reference in the informal learning process.

The problems faced by the participants catalyzed an informal learning process in which the participants’ frames of reference influenced their interpretation and the selection of their approach to the problem and their learning. Interpretation, strategy selection, and evaluation of the outcomes of an intervention were influenced by the participants’ frames of reference. The transformation of the participants’ frames of reference were facilitated through the evaluation and lessons learned phases, ultimately reframing the situation, and forming an altered frame of reference (Table 1). Table 1 aligns the informal learning process phase in the left column with the frame of reference activity located in the right column.
Table 1

*Frame of reference and informal learning*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informal Learning Phase</th>
<th>Frame of Reference Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trigger</td>
<td>A catalyst which instigates the informal learning process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>Utilizing existing frames of reference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing Strategies</td>
<td>Utilizing existing frames of reference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Strategies</td>
<td>Utilizing and transforming existing frames of reference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td>Utilizing existing frames of reference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of outcomes</td>
<td>Utilizing existing frames of reference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons learned</td>
<td>Transforming existing frames of reference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framing</td>
<td>Transforming existing frames of reference.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Frames of reference both influenced the informal learning process and were influenced by the learning process which is characteristic of microgenetic and sociocultural development (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). As such, frames of reference contributed to informal learning and development, and subsequently these participants' frames of reference were transformed through informal learning. This reciprocal interaction is an important factor in developing a holistic understanding of informal learning and professional development.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The findings of this study draw attention to a broader examination of the influence of frames of reference as a dynamic transformational process through informal learning. Therefore, a revision of the Cseh et al. (1999) reconceptualized model of Informal and Incidental Learning may facilitate greater utility by extending the boundaries of informal learning to the whole experience of the individual. Though these participants were involved in the workplace setting and engaged in the informal learning process, their frames of reference became a filter for
understanding the context, inclusive of workplace elements which represented only one domain in which their frames of reference were shaped and exerted influence. Therefore, central to informal learning are frames of reference and it is necessary to connect the influence of frames of reference to each phase of the informal learning process. Figure 1 presents the revised the Informal and Incidental Learning Model supported by the findings of this study.

**Figure 1. Revised Informal and Incidental Learning Model.**
In this revised conceptual model, the Informal and Incidental Learning Process is embedded in context, which is filtered by the individual’s frames of reference. Within the domains of context and frame of reference, work, as well as other domains of one’s lived-experience, are embedded both influencing and being influenced by one’s frame of reference. Relocating context and frame of reference in this way provides an articulation of the entire context of an environment, physically, individually, historically, politically, and socially. These sociocultural facets are interwoven in the informal learning process inclusive of the whole person (Jurasaitė-Harbison, 2009; Marsick, 2009).

**Conclusions and Significance**

The overall process of informal learning as previously articulated by Marsick et al. (2006) was supported by this study. It was observed that the participants encountered a trigger in the workplace, which resulted in their engagement in an informal learning process (Cseh et al., 1999; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Marsick et al., 2006). However, the interaction of participants’ frames of reference with the various phases of the informal learning process displayed a dynamic nature in which the participants’ frames of reference influenced the informal learning process while, the informal learning process influenced the participants’ frames of reference (Eraut, 2004). The participants’ frames of reference specifically influenced the interpretation, selection, action, and meaning making phases of the informal learning process. Reciprocally, the participants’ frames of reference were influenced dynamically through the informal learning process. The informal learning process transformed the participants’ frames of reference through the phases of evaluating outcomes, lessons learned, and reframing. The findings from this study are significant to HRD theory and practice because they contribute to a broader and more holistic
understanding of informal learning and a revised model that incorporates the centrality of frames of reference which have received limited attention in the scholarly literature.
References


