

# The Interplay Between Formal and Informal Learning for Low Skilled Workers



## Executive Summary



Partnerships in Learning

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### The Learning Paths of Workers with Low Skills

This project was interested in tracing the learning paths, trigger events and decisions that workers with low skills make to become engaged in workplace training. It was also interested in describing the range of formal workplace literacy programs, types of informal training and the learning process of low skilled workers. Another objective was to conduct a comparative analysis with a study in the United Kingdom looking at workplace basic skills strategies for enhancing employee productivity and development. Seven companies, 54 workers and 18 instructors provided information for the Canadian data base while four workplace sites involving 42 employees and 6 supervisors/tutors made up the UK data base. The key project findings are described in the following three sections.

### The Range of Formal Workplace Programs

Drawing from the Canadian data, small, medium and large companies offer a variety of

formal workplace education programs. A common feature across all of the companies is the use of the term essential skills programming. Workers, instructors and employers all use this same term to describe a full range of content and curriculum. One of the key reasons for the inception of these formal programs was that the company was in a period of growth, or downsizing or technological change. These circumstances triggered the employer to offer the training program or in some cases a worker group to request the training from the company.

In the larger and medium sized companies, a much wider range of formal training programs were provided to employees and included high school up-grading, ESL and computer training and WHMIS, First Aid and CPR. Programs also focused on communication and team work such as Public Relations in the Workplace, Communicating with Emotional Intelligence and Manufacturing Leadership. Some of these programs were offered in a Learning Centre at the worksite and provided some type of sequenced curriculum taught by a qualified instructor resulting in certification or participation recognition or mastery of a work related task. In the smaller type companies, training



opportunities with instructors tended to be shorter types of learning experiences such as report writing, document reading, conflict resolution workshops and numeracy instruction.

In two of the UK cases provision related to the larger, multi-site organisation. Although the classes have been carried out at a wide range of sites they are mainly held in various centres or 'Learning Zones'. Equipped with computers and training rooms, they aim to provide an inviting and non-threatening space for learning, which includes literacy, numeracy, General Certificate for Secondary Education (GCSE) English, IT alongside other courses. In one case, a training facility initially consisting of a small room with 5 computers expanded to a learning centre and became a 'LearnDirect' (mediated computer-based training) Centre. The Centre is also open to the local community. In addition to computer and skills for life courses and job-specific training, the Centre also offers adult education courses which have been very important in attracting individuals from the company and community at large. In another food processing company, literacy and language courses were union negotiated and offered as part of a company to upskill their existing workforce in order to fill promoted positions internally such as team leader.

One of the key findings of the study was that employee participation in a formal program acted as the catalyst for the various informal training activities that occurred back on the shop floor. Participating in an organized class or in a tutorial session heightened employee awareness of the importance to learn. This interplay between formal and informal training was synergistic.

Back on the floor, employees experienced a certain type of assuredness in their literacy skills to try their regular or associated job tasks in different ways by themselves or with others informally.

Workers began to realize that they were on a pathway of learning. For some employees, the driving force for participation in the formal program was the credential or chances of career advancement, but this external motivation shifted once they become engaged in the more informal learning. What fuelled this desire to learn without the structures of the formal program was a viewpoint that the day to day work requirements could be done differently or better through self-initiated or team-initiated learning.

There was also evidence of an interplay between formal learning and informal learning, with both external and internal motivation combining in highly context specific ways. An example is a UK employee in a food processing plant, who she saw a very direct and tangible link between the formal course and the skills used day to day at work. Her case also underlined some of the advantages and disadvantages of workplace-based formal courses: such training offers accessibility but also can potentially be negatively affected by pressure from managers/supervisors on employees to miss learning sessions in order to fulfill their duties in the workplace. Greater day to day job satisfaction was apparent in many of the UK employees who had participated in formal workplace courses, and had developed a greater awareness of the learning potential in their jobs as well as their own abilities to learn.



## Types of Informal Training

Based on the data, two different but related conceptions of informal learning can be seen. One conception is workplace informal learning type and the other is at the trigger event and attitude level which might be viewed as the workplace informal learning process. Five types of workplace informal learning emerged from the case studies. The first type “Observing from Knowledgeables” included learning a new task or the same job task in a different way from a more proficient co-worker or supervisor. This often meant that the worker self-identified a mistake or error in a job task and searched for an expert to observe doing the same task.

“Practicing without Supervision” was a second type. For the most part, workers sought after new experiences where they could practice a skill, like problem solving, or participate in the company in a new way such as joining a union or health safety committee. In some cases transfer of these skills learned informally happened outside of the workplace. A third type is “Searching Independently for Information”. Workers often used their reading and computer skills to search for new kinds of information on a challenge presented in the routines of the work day. Frequently, the Internet, Intranet and work manuals were used for this information search. If employees had already taken a company computer program there was transfer of learning and if not some initial guidance by a co-worker was provided. “Focused Workplace Discussions” with peers and supervisors was another main type of informal learning. Employees used questioning and summarizing skills to engage in work-

place updates. They sometimes exchanged e-mails around work task procedures and for reporting new changes. In another cases employees believed that work related safety was an important trigger for informal learning. This type of learning takes place during regular safety meetings.

“Mentoring and Coaching” was another type of informal learning. Most workers who taught a co-worker how to perform a job-related task reported that this was an important way of informal learning. They realized that they first had to talk through the steps of the job task and understand the sequencing before coaching another worker. Many employees said that they were aware of an increased ability to mentally organize information when demonstrating a task to another worker.

## The Informal Learning Process

As an informal learning process, three patterns emerged - trigger events, attitudes towards life-long learning and inner recognition. The trigger events that prompted the informal learning were mainly related to a company ethos of quality performance and safety concerns within the work environment. Employees who belonged to companies that had a well defined and visible learning culture wanted to perform better for the organization or the customer. Most often workers who had completed a formal workplace education program returned to the factory floor with a heightened awareness that some work responsibilities could be done differently. Coupled with this was a certain attitude held by the workers about life-



long learning. Some employees had a curiosity about wanting to learn new things at the workplace. These workers believed they possessed the creativity and imagination to learn. Other workers exhibited an uncertain and tentative attitude toward learning. They felt more dependent on others for help and guidance and less prone to pose questions. A third part of the process may be related to an inner recognition that the informal learning activity has personal and work benefits. This is evidenced in increased worker self-esteem. It is interesting to note that most employees were not motivated to learn informally for monetary rewards or the possibility of upward mobility. They were spurred on by the need for a challenge or variety in the everyday work routine.

Particular to the UK database, employees' personal and educational backgrounds as well as skills they had learned from a variety of experiences in and out of paid employment

influenced the ways in which they carried out their duties and responsibilities and dealt with various workplace situations. It was found that formal workplace programs had the potential to compensate for previously negative educational experiences and to raise awareness of the opportunities (or 'affordances') for further learning through everyday work practices. Formal workplace programs have the potential to compensate for previously negative educational experiences and to respond to individuals' shifting attitudes to learning, with spin-offs for engagement in informal learning. However, they need to be supported by working environments that are 'expansive' if they are to be successfully sustained. Promotion prospects and strategies seem to be important in sustaining employee motivation to take up formal courses in the longer term; this is less so for engagement in informal learning, where the focus is on current job satisfaction.