Informal Learning Experiences

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine two primary examples of informal learning experiences: 1) within my capacity as an office assistant at a small counseling center and 2) within my community participating in a local billiards league. Despite the similarities of both experiences being informal, each example will be examined using a different experienced based model. For the workplace example, I will analyze the informal learning experience using Victoria J. Marsick and Karen E. Watkins's informal and incidental learning in the workplace model. Whereas, the community learning experience will be analyzed using Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's communities of practice model. After the two examples are viewed from their respective experience based models, practical implications will be considered.

Workplace Learning

Shortly after my college graduation I found myself in Baltimore, Maryland looking for a full-time position. Not having real, professional experience I looked for entry level positions and ended up being hired at a local counseling center's one (out of two) locations. The office manager from the other, main, location was responsible for my training. She showed me how to create client lists for the day, run credit card payments, schedule follow-up appointments, handle new client intakes, the patient software the center used, etc. The more I became comfortable with the more responsibilities I could add to my day. Eventually, I learned more about insurance companies and how that related to our clients and to how the therapists/center received payment for services rendered. One task related to our client software was to be able to locate the client's information and to interpret the account. This includes copays, insurance payments, and write-offs. Since there was plenty of downtime in between clients I began to work through client accounts. The office manager from the main location showed me how to print out the forms that we sent to the insurance companies. They would, in turn, send the allowable amount agreed upon for each therapist and we would write-off the portion that the client was not responsible for. The office manager had me shadow her as she went through the calls with the insurance companies and their explanation of benefits and the payments to make sure things were paid appropriately by both parties. As a result of the shadowing, I combined the what I learned about patient accounts and insurance billings. This combination led to the discovery of many unpaid bills by both clients and the insurance companies. The down time turned into product time where I would rebill insurance companies and clients. The result was that we were able to collect thousands of dollars in payments due.

Learning about informal and incidental learning experience models, I am reminded of my time at the counseling center. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) include "supervised training or mentoring, self-paced study, attending presentations or conferences, or reading journals/magazines" in the "work-related informal learning" category (p. 60). Marsick, Watkins, Callahan, and Volpe (2009) recognize that "informal learning benefits from being linked to meaningful job activities," whereas, incidental learning can be "beneficial when one moves the accidental learning opportunity closer to the informal learning realm through conscious attention, reflection, and action" (p. 572). This type of learning is based on the "theory of learning from and through experience" (Marsick, et al., p. 572). When the office manager trained me on basic office tasks through direct conversation or indirectly through shadowing, we participated in informal learning. This learning was linked to meaningful job activities and I continued learning through self-direction. The incidental portion of this learning experience can be seen in the organizational skills I developed as a result of the informal learning. I incidentally learned prioritization, multitasking, and the subtle nuances (socio-cultural) of working in a counseling center.

Community Learning

As mentioned earlier, one of my hobbies is participating in a local billiards (pool) league. Growing up, my father was an avid pool player. Even though I went with him to the pool halls and played with friends as a teenager, I never really picked it up as a main hobby. After moving to Bloomington, my husband and I joined a local league. We play in the American Poolplayers Association (the other APA). It is a national group that has local leagues. There are numerous teams in a league on multiple nights out of the week. The league creates its own community of people who have similar interests in billiards. It is an amateur league and the skill level of the

players varies immensely. When we started, we were both at the bottom of the skill levels. My husband, similar to me, had casually played with friends but was never seriously involved in billiards. A friend added us to her team and we have been involved in the league for about six years. During that time, we have practiced with other people, played in league matches, played in local tournaments, and played in the national tournament in Las Vegas. It is a diverse group of people. People of all ages, races, socio-economic statuses, and education levels come together and play pool every week. Some of these people we may have never met any other way but because we share a common interest in billiards we are now friends.

I happened to be reading about communities of practice while I was in between matches at the pool hall. After reading Wenger's three elements that "distinguish a community of practice from other groups and communities" (Smith, 2009), I was convinced that our local billiards league would be considered a community of practice. In our league we have "domain, community, and practice" (Smith, 2009). According to Wegner, what is "shared by a community of practice—what makes it a community—is its practice" (Merriam, et al., p. 293). Our practice is billiards and the community has formed around the practice. The league community is constantly growing and developing. People are involved in "relationships and generating a shared repertoire of ideas, commitments, and memories" (Smith, 2009). We have our own terminology and the "older" members impart knowledge of the game to new members and players. There is also an interesting occurrence that Jean Lave mentions. Lave believes that a characteristic of communities of practice is that these communities "shape newcomers' identities" and "gives recognition and validation by other participants of the changing practice of newcomers-become-oldtimers" (p. 74). My husband and I have experienced this because years

ago we were the new members and have since then transitioned into more of an old member role as new players join the league.

Conclusion

According to Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007), the "very nature of informal learning is what makes it so difficult for adults to recognize because it is embedded in our everyday activities" (p. 35). Even though it might be difficult to recognize, it is important as adult educators that we understand how to encourage informal learning in our various circles. Marsick addresses a key problem that might inhibit informal learning and provides a solution. She says that a "lack of appropriate systems, technology-based or human-interaction-centered, does not support knowledge sharing" (p. 272). In order to better support knowledge sharing and informal learning the "systems and practices should be strengthened rather than micro-managing learning activities" (p. 272). The different models of informal learning demonstrate that adults are constantly learning, even if it is incidental. The fact that so much of adult learning occurs outside of a formal classroom should change the way educators approach their work with adults. Rather than separate the two, it would be best for educators to incorporate the knowledge gained from informal experiences into learning activities.

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